

## **The Many Faces of Laura Baker: Stories from Today**

These stories were gathered during interviews with LBSA staff and clients during January-March 2008. I hope that they will provide a window into daily life at LBSA so as to illustrate how LBSA continues to be an exceptional and unique organization. LBSA's administrative staff will use these stories for staff training and fundraising. All names have been changed for privacy. The truest way to know LBSA is to know the people who make up the organization. With that in mind, I hope these stories help you understand the lived meaning of LBSA's mission, vision, and values.

### **Robert: Residential Counselor and Artist in Residence**

Everyone on LBSA's campus knows Robert, if only because he has spent the last few months building an igloo with clients in the middle of the Oak Street campus. Robert graduated from St. Olaf College with a degree in studio art, and has found many ways to help clients make art, running art workshops on campus and using art to engage with individual clients. He decided to build the igloo as a "public sculpture," a way to get clients outside socializing in the snow. It worked! Especially on nice days, the igloo project has attracted clients who often don't socialize or go outside much. Robert loves joking around with clients, and tells me that even nonverbal clients have their ways of joking: sitting down in the shower or blocking the way in the hall while smiling. He finds that "if people are laughing, behavior problems just go away." For Robert, clients are "a treasure trove of personality": "it often takes them a while to open up and build relationships, but they have a lot going on inside, and it's really valuable."

## **Rebecca: Lead Residential Counselor and Mentor Coordinator**

Rebecca started working at LBSA in 1979 right after graduating from junior college. Though Rebecca knew that she wanted to work with special needs, she had no interest in working at the state hospital in Faribault. She volunteered there several times in high school, but uncomfortable memories of a huge room “with people just lined up around the walls”, made her unwilling to return. At Laura Baker Rebecca found much more of a home atmosphere: for the first six months that she worked as direct care staff, Rebecca lived in the old main house with clients and other staff, and all staff and clients ate all meals together in the dining room. “How we did it I don’t know,” Rebecca laughs when she remembers how chaotic meals could get.

The big white house was full of surprises: rooms led to one another like a maze, and there were enough bats in the basement laundry room that “you’d go down there with a tennis racket”. During the summer, nearly the whole school would pack up and move to the summer camp on Roberds Lake for nine or ten weeks. Rebecca loved summer camp! She fondly remembers water fights, steak frys, boat rides, and games with clients, as well as “raiding the refrigerator” with other staff after clients went to sleep. Everyone shared one showerhouse, and “if you didn’t hustle, you got a cold shower!” Camp was even fun when it rained: staff and clients got into mud fights!

Though today Rebecca works part-time as direct care staff and LBSA’s Mentor Coordinator, she worked as a household director for twenty years. Rebecca is full of stories about her experiences at LBSA, especially stories about helping clients do things that they didn’t think they could. She told me about seeing clients who’ve practiced writing their name finally be able to sign their own paychecks, about helping a client

who's always had staff supervision in public places be able to walk to and from the library by himself. She loves it when some of the young men living on MGI cook the household breakfast and when Prader-Willi clients are able to cook by putting toppings on their own pizzas.

Rebecca told me about Wallace, a client with Prader-Willi syndrome who dreamed of cooking his own meals. Since Prader-Willi clients have a hard time not stealing food, staff supported Wallace's goal by hosting 'cooking class', setting out precise quantities of each ingredient he would need on a tray. Wallace's success surprised even himself. Rebecca remembers him saying, "See how well I did? I didn't take anything that didn't belong to me. I cooked myself dinner." Wallace's cooking lessons continued as long as he lived at LBSA, and when he moved to a different place closer to home, he incorporated them into his new routine right away.

Rebecca really values the opportunity to see clients overcome obstacles to achieve greater independence. When LBSA transitioned to having all bedroom doors lock, Dylan, a client Rebecca worked with, really had trouble unlocking his door. He worked on it for two years, and it was frustrating for him to try over and over. One day Dylan just opened the door, and he's been able to do it ever since. It opened a whole world for him to be able to go in and out of his room without relying on a staff member to help.

### **Lauren: Administrative Support Staff**

When Lauren first arrived at Laura Baker five months ago for a job interview, she was a little nervous. Lauren grew up in LBSA's neighborhood during a time when developmental disability still carried a great deal of stigma, even in Northfield. Though

she knew she was qualified for the open position, Lauren didn't know how comfortable she would be working with LBSA clients. As she walked up to the main building, Susie, a client standing outside Cottage called to her, "Hi, come over here!" Though she was a little nervous, Lauren decided that since Susie had a staff member with her, she would be safe in the situation. Lauren walked over. Susie showed Lauren a new necklace that she was wearing, and Lauren said, "Oh, you look like a princess today". Though Susie doesn't usually interact with strangers very much at all, she smiled and gave Lauren a hug. Lauren said, "Oh, do you need a squeezer?" Susie responded by hugging Lauren a little tighter, and the two women hugged for three or four minutes. Lauren knew right then that she was meant to work at LBSA. After that hug, she wasn't nervous anymore.

### **Dave: Client, Prairie House**

One of the first things I noticed when I walked into Dave's room was a hand-drawn picture dedicated to "Mr. Flirt" hanging on the wall. I asked Dave if this nickname was due to his friendly, outgoing personality. His response was "Yes, and what are you doing tomorrow?" Few people associated with LBSA have known it as long as Dave, who has been a client for fifty-nine years.

Relationships are extremely important to Dave, who is close to many LBSA staff as well as many friends in Northfield. He attends Covenant Church every Sunday and spends weekday afternoons at Three Links Care Center exercising and socializing. Every time I see Dave, he asks me if I've seen Alice, his Carleton College buddy at school. He loves spending time with her, especially when they go downtown and get hot chocolate together. It's easy to understand why Dave's walls are plastered with drawings, cards,

and photographs from family and friends: Dave is kind and charming. He's not afraid to let people, especially ladies, know how much they matter to him. On the morning of our interview, Dave was counting down the minutes until LeeAnn, a staff member he is close to, arrived for the day. When she arrived, he gave her a big hug and told her how glad he was to see her. When I left Prairie House, Dave took my arm and asked me, "When will I see you again?"

**Kate: Household Director, MGI**

For Kate, her relationships with the clients she serves make LBSA a "place that's very addicting". She began working as direct care staff during high school, returned during college summers, and now serves as Household Director in the first floor of Margaret Graves Hall. Kate's known Calvin, one of the clients in her household, since she first began at Laura Baker, and she feels especially close and committed to him. Her face lights up when she talks about his sense of humor and "great smile."

Kate describes her role in her household as "a second mom" to a group of people that "feels like a family". Being that second mom sometimes means late-night phone calls, caring for staff as well as clients, and lots of patience. Kate laughed as she told me, "since all our household's clients are young men, things can get a little chaotic around dinnertime." It's clear that this chaos is no match for Kate's efficient, energetic personality!

**Sarah: Client, Elwell House**

Sarah has nicknames for lots of people at Laura Baker, including for herself. She's "Sarah Chocolate Peaches," Maggie is "Maggie Chocolate Pancakes," and Britney is "Britney Mashed Potatoes," to name a few. These nicknames are a great example of Sarah's witty way with words. She keeps her staff laughing by using silly expressions like "kaboom" or (when dancing) "shake your booty down."

Though Sarah, 21, has only lived at LBSA for two years, she is very close to staff members, especially Maggie, her HD. She calls Robert "Robert The Creative" because they often do art projects together, one of Sarah's favorite activities. Sarah keeps a beautiful scrapbook containing pictures of her friends and family, and the first pictures she showed me were Maggie's and Robert's. The three of them write letters to one another, and Sarah showed me old letters proudly.

Sarah has an incredibly warm and affectionate personality: she gives great, frequent hugs, and ends many of her sentences addressing others with "honey". She loves animals, and enjoys visiting the Humane Society and "holding the baby kitties, honey". One of Sarah's staff just had a baby, and Sarah told me excitedly that when the baby gets bigger, Sarah will be able to hold her!

### **Lucy: Client, Baker House**

The first thing Lucy told me about living at Laura Baker was "I live here because I have Prader-Willi syndrome". The second thing she told me was how much her quality of life has improved since coming to LBSA six years ago. Lucy "really feels grateful" to staff, especially the kitchen staff, who have helped her lose a lot of weight. Exercise has

become very important to Lucy: every day after work she walks on a treadmill in her room, usually while watching TV or listening to oldies like “Wake Up Little Susie.”

Lucy is good friends with most of the other Baker House residents, and they enjoy watching movies and playing board games together. She also enjoys spending time alone in her room, playing computer games and watching TV. In addition to her very full life in Baker house, Lucy spends a lot of time in the larger LBSA community. She loves singing in the Laura Baker choir, and really enjoyed performing for residents of several Northfield nursing homes last year. One of Lucy’s dreams came true last summer, when she, two other clients, and two staff traveled to Disney World for a week’s vacation. They had a blast! Lucy told me about eating dinner in restaurants, swimming every night in the hotel pool, and seeing animals, shops, parades, and shows. Her favorite ride was the roller coaster!

When I asked Lucy about Laura Baker’s history, she told me excitedly that it is over 100 years old. Though Lucy wasn’t a client when it was still standing, she told me about “a big white house where staff used to live with clients.” In part because of its rich history and in part because of the positive changes she’s made here, Lucy feels really proud to be a part of Laura Baker.

**Shawna: Senior Residential Counselor, MGI**

Shawna feels particularly close to Calvin, one of the clients in the household where she works. They spend a lot of time together, and their trusting relationship means that Shawna rarely has to perform a hold on Calvin in order to prevent him from hurting himself or others. After a particularly long “hold-less” stretch, one night Shawna had to

perform an on-floor restraint with Calvin. Though it was unquestionably the right thing to do, Shawna felt sad afterwards. Calvin comforted Shawna later that night. He came out of his room, walked up to Kate, his HD, shook her hand, and said, "Sorry." Then he walked over to Shawna, shook her hand, and sat down in the living room. Shawna felt much better immediately. Calvin's apology showed that he still trusted that she cared about him. More importantly to Shawna, it showed her that he cared about her feelings too.

### **James: Client, MGII**

James became an LBSA client in June 2004, and he likes living at 211 Oak Street "because of the people". Those are telling words, since James is quite the people person. He loves spending time with his housemates and their staff, and every time I go to his household he's in the lounge to greet me and ask how I am. I talked with James the day after dinner theater at LBSA, and he was still brimming with happy memories of the evening. He enjoyed getting dressed up, loved the food, and had a "lot of fun". His favorite thing about the event was the performance by the Carleton swing dancing club, who "had moves that I've never seen before" like flips and lifts. Dinner theater is definitely James' favorite special event at Laura Baker.

James has many musical interests, and spends a lot of time listening to CDs and the radio. His favorite artist is Michael W. Smith, but he enjoys country, rap, and heavy metal as well. James is the most recent addition to the Laura Baker Choir, and he loves to sing. (I hear from several staff, including LBSA's music therapist, that he has an incredible singing voice). Sports are also a big part of James' life: he plays Special Olympics basketball and loves going bowling. When I asked James what was important

to him, his answer was simple: family, friends, sports, and entertainment matter a lot, but above all else, “life is important to me.”

### **Maggie: Household Director, Elwell House**

Maggie started working at Laura Baker in June 2003, but she has always felt a connection with the organization. Growing up in Northfield with a developmentally disabled younger brother made Maggie very conscious of LBSA’s work and its importance. Perhaps because of her family background, Maggie has a natural aptitude for working with developmentally disabled people. She’s quickly risen in her time at LBSA from direct care staff to Household director, a position she’s held for two years now. Maggie really values her leadership role in Elwell house. She’s very close to her staff, and takes pride in building good relationships with clients’ families and guardians as well as the clients themselves. This enthusiasm has been great for Elwell house: in the time since Maggie began her position, staff turnover rate has gone from 300% to 30%!

Maggie loves taking care of people, which makes her a great HD! In her words, “I feel like a mother- a soccer mom, even—to six people: you know, someone’s got Special Olympics here, someone’s got Project Able there, this person needs a haircut, we’ve got to go to the bank for this person—it’s like running in chaos, but you never leave here ever feeling bad about what you’ve done.” The Elwell house family has become a part of Maggie’s family: in the summer she brings everyone to her parents’ house for cookouts and games. Holidays are difficult for Sylvia, an Elwell house client, because she doesn’t have any contact with her family. Maggie’s solution to this was simple: Sylvia eats Thanksgiving dinner with Maggie’s family.

When I asked Maggie if clients ever took care of her, she laughed, and replied, “All the time!” When Maggie cries during sad movies, clients comfort her, patting her back and saying things like “Oh Miss Maggie chocolate pancakes, please don’t cry! Please don’t cry!” Clients care for her in more serious ways, too.

One Friday about four years ago, Maggie had been working much too hard because of a temporary staff shortage. When she arrived for a 13-hour shift that morning, she had already worked 56 hours since Sunday! Needless to say, by the end of Maggie’s shift, she was *really* ready to go home and sleep. The last thing she had to do was distribute medication. Maggie had already finished two households when she got to Elwell house, and she was moving “like a robot” as she set out pills. Sylvia was the first client that Maggie handed meds to. When Sylvia saw the cup, she asked Maggie “Um, what are you doing?” Since Sylvia can sometimes have an issue about taking her medication, Maggie said, “Come on, Sylvia, please take them!” Sylvia replied, “I’ll take them, as soon as they’re the right ones!” Maggie looked at the cup and felt all the blood rush out of her head. She had set out Sylvia’s morning meds instead of her evening ones: an eleven-pill difference that could have sent Sylvia to the hospital.

Maggie blurted out, “I should NOT be doing this. I’m way too tired.” She called another medication passer and asked them to finish the task, and sat quietly until her shift was over. She was “seriously horrified”. Sylvia comforted Maggie that night, saying, “You have been here every day, morning and night.” Today they have a running joke: Sylvia checks Maggie’s work every time Maggie gives her medication. In fact, if Sylvia’s being grumpy about taking medication and Maggie asks her to check her work, Sylvia will count the pills and take them out of habit without realizing what she’s doing.

Afterwards Sylvia's mood will often turn around, as, laughing, she'll tell Maggie, "Darn, you got me!"

**Leslie: Household Director, Hayes House**

Leslie came to Laura Baker in 1989 after working for eleven years caring for developmentally disabled people in a state hospital. She decided to change employers, despite taking a significant pay cut as a single mother, because she was becoming burned out by the way the state facility was structured. Leslie watched staff stop treat clients like people because of frustration with the amount of paperwork and regulations necessary for every aspect of clients' care: "“If I wanted to take someone to the park I didn't want to have to fill out a form, request a vehicle, and wait three weeks, I wanted to say 'it's a nice day,' and go to the park.”"

A friend of Leslie's worked on the LBSA staff, and invited Leslie to come visit. She was incredibly impressed by the "close and personal" atmosphere she noticed on campus. LBSA's staff: client ratio was much lower than the state facility's, and Leslie immediately saw how LBSA's standard of care differed from the "impersonal kennel care" she was performing in her current job. Leslie accepted a position at LBSA, hasn't regretted it, and "never will".

LBSA's family atmosphere is very important to Leslie. When she had a baby son six years ago, Brenda, her supervisor, allowed her to bring her son to work for the first two years. Clients loved spending time with him, and he still visits their household. When Leslie's father suffered an extended illness and she was commuting to Rochester to care for him, the household staff held meetings at his house so that she could continue to care

for him. Today Leslie's daughter works with her on the Hayes house staff, and the clients in their household have become like their family.

When Leslie got married eight years ago, all the clients came to her wedding. Everyone had a great time, but when it was time to go, Dan, who's usually quite mild-mannered, adamantly refused to leave. Dan isn't very verbal, so it took Leslie a while to figure out what was bothering him, but she did: he was NOT leaving until he got to dance with the bride! Leslie and Dan danced, and then Dan got his coat and left. This experience made Leslie realize how important she is to the clients she serves.

Leslie's experience in her field has given her the perspective to recognize that "Laura Baker is just head and shoulders above the rest in how they do things." She's a proud *Spirit of Laura Baker* Award recipient, saying "It's great to know that there's a plaque down the hall with my name on it that will be there as long as this place is here, and that someday my grandchildren might come see it." When I asked Leslie why Laura Baker's standard of care was superior, she replied, "It feels right the way things are done here, mostly because it's about the clients."