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Sara Gatewood: A Career in Passion

By Kate Stark

I am of the opinion that my life belongs to the community, and as long as I live, it is my privilege to do for it whatever I can. I want to be thoroughly used up when I die, for the harder I work, the more I live. Life is no 'brief candle' to me. It is a sort of splendid torch, which I have got hold of for a moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations.

These words from George Bernard Shaw are how Sara Gatewood lives her life. Sara, a Home and Program Coordinator with OVRS, is bubbly and enthusiastic as we meet in her office. It seems that she has boundless energy when talking about the people who live in this apartment building and the intersection of their lives with hers through her work with OVRS. She especially lights up when it comes to discovering what others are passionate about, and finding ways to make their dreams a reality.

Sara has countless stories of trips to Graceland, Alcatraz, and Disney among other places, but is equally excited to talk about the new job a resident got or the way this very independent group bands together to support one another. It all comes

down to helping people achieve their goals, however big or small those may be.

"Sara is extremely client-centered and reminds me of many who got into this field years ago with the sole purpose of assisting people with disabilities with living a life they desire," says OVRS Executive Director Jamie Steele.

Sara has now been with OVRS for 23 years, but she's been working in this field for even longer. She found her passion thanks to a unique collaboration between the private high school she attended in Michigan and a special needs high school; by her senior year she was working at the other high school part-time.

"I actually never thought that I would do it as a full-time job," Sara admits. "I continued doing it while I was in college, but then because you get attached to people, you feel really dedicated to them and you want to help them succeed in life."

Three of the individuals Sara works with today as a Home and Program Coordinator have been with her since she started working with Ohio Valley as a part-time direct care provider 23 years ago. They've been through a lot of big life changes together, moving from North Creek Apartments to North College Hill and Oakley, celebrating marriages, and grieving the deaths of a few friends.



Sara is an avid runner and mountain biker

"It's supporting them through every step of their life, whether it's happy or sad or frustrating. Sometimes I'm kind of like their coach, or their interpreter, or their teacher, or their confidant," Sara says. "It's just life happening every day, and no matter what it is you've got to confront it. You can't hide from anything, because it's their life. One of the things that I think is: what if I was the person living here and I had to depend on a staff person? If it was me, what would I want somebody doing for me?"

That includes end-of-life preparations. Sara's honesty and straightforwardness helps to make those conversations a little easier, and she talks with residents about their end-of-life wishes, knowing from experience that she may be the person to carry them out.

She gets choked up remembering the people she's supported over the years who have passed away—all of their quirks, likes, and dislikes— and it is clear how much Sara truly cares for each person as an individual.

And the families and residents sincerely care for her too. She has countless cards and notes spanning decades of work, many offering a simple "thank you" or expressing joy at taking a vacation. In one, a woman writes Sara following her sister Jane's death, "You are a warm and wonderful person with so much compassion, caring and unconditional love for others, especially the disabled. Jane must have learned from you! Jane loved you and you were able to give her loving words and instructions to advise her in this world."

Her residents refer to her as a friend, and Larry who Sara has supported for the last 23 years says, "I like to talk to Sara about the [important] people in my life that have died, cause she knew them, too." Certainly, having a long-term relationship with someone so integral to your daily life is invaluable to anyone. Due to her long tenure at OVRs, Sara says, "I have had relationships with people, and I have memories with people that I never would have had [without this job], and I think their lives have been better too."



Sara with her friend Larry

Because of the emotional highs and lows that accompany a job like this, many care providers burn out over time. Sara says that taking time for herself has been key to avoiding a career-ending burnout, plus there is never a good time to leave the people she cares so much about. "I know that I need to support them, because usually [following a death] they have their own grief going on, or someone else has something going on that they need support with, so even though I might feel a little burnt out at times, it's like I have keep doing this because there is always someone to support."

"Sara truly loves the people that she supports and her passion for their uniquenesses, ability to self-direct their services, is a wonderful example for anyone who is looking at making a career in residential services to people with developmental disabilities," says Steele. "Often those entering the profession don't see direct-care as a career, but Sara is shining example of what being true to mission day in and day out is all about."



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