



Mental Retardation: Vol. 44, No. 1, pp. 74–76, February 2008

Power of a Poet: Karl Williams

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I remember with fondness the cluster of self-advocacy groups that organized in and around Philadelphia in the 1980s. Most of these associations of persons with intellectual disabilities springing up across America at that time called themselves “People First” organizations, but not this group. It chose an action title: “Speaking for Ourselves.” After all, wasn't this the basic, down-to-earth goal the members longed for so deeply?

Then, in the late 1980s, the members of Speaking for Ourselves decided that every great movement needed a rallying song. After all, if the alumni of Notre Dame's “Fighting Irish” could sing their enthusiastic support for their teams, why couldn't self-advocates sing with the same gusto to buck up and hold together their members?

At that time, a soft-spoken young man worked as a supporter of Speaking for Ourselves. Karl Williams is a man with better than a decade of hands-on service to these individuals. He knew what they wanted, so he wrote a song. While strumming chords on his guitar, he sang it to them. The chorus was simple and straight to the point:

**We are speaking for ourselves
Speaking for ourselves
No one else can do as well
Speaking for ourselves.**

The members loved it. The song contained that same soft mixture of thought-provoking message and arresting harmony that was typical of Simon and Garfunkel.

The chorus was easy to memorize. The members sang it in their local groups. At times when all of the groups came together, they sang it religiously at the opening and closing of the meeting. The song contained three stanzas that pinpointed the perplexities these persons faced every day.

Fright

This first stanza spoke of the unspeakable fear that often lurked in the minds of every self-advocate:

**Once I was afraid to speak
I was lonely I was weak
With a voice so very small
That I had no voice at all.**

Comradeship

The second stanza enabled each member to sing about the invigorating closeness they found in their togetherness:

**Then I found a friend like me
And another made us three
And we laughed and then we cried
And this is what we tried.**

Sheer Guts

In the final lines, the members of Speaking for Ourselves sang about facing the toughest perplexities of their lives head-on:

**We've been called by many names
We've been made to feel ashamed
We've been locked behind a door
But we'll come outside once more.**

Scorn Not This Simplicity

Many of us have acquired certain professional ways of speaking and we are often graded on how well we speak to others who know the same “bureaucratese.” It works well in some occasions. There are times, however, when certain perplexities lock us up in our own jargon. Consequently, my friend, sociologist Richard Voorhees constantly reminds me that good poets and songwriters may rescue us from our entangling times with fresh, simple, lilting, down-to-earth words.

Interestingly, since Karl Williams wrote this first song, he has soared as a composer, poet, and author. He created a complete album, *Respect: Songs of the Self-Advocacy Movement* that was a candidate for Best Contemporary Folk Album in the 1998 Grammy Awards. He won three

American Society of Composers and Authors (ASCAP) awards. He has written two as-told-to books. One of them was *Lost in a Desert World* (Williams, 1999). It featured the late Roland Johnson, a nationally famous self-advocate who got his start as a member of Speaking for Ourselves. *Publishers Weekly* (2001) writers spoke glowingly of Williams' songs and how they can touch the hearts of families and children. One specific example was noted in the children's category: "Big fish eat little fish in the ocean and the bay/Big fish eat little fish every night and every day/ Big fish eat little fish that's what they say/But I hope the little fish get away." The many creations of this songwriter and poet can be discovered by going to karlwilliams.com.

The success of Williams makes me wonder whether there are other artists in our field like him. If so, would this *Journal* become richer and more enlightening if the best poems and songs about human conditions of the persons we work with and care about were published?

References

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Karl Williams

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