

“Genny lived and loved with no exceptions”

By: Berta Britz

Saturday January 11th I was present for a spirit-filled gathering in the Church on the Mall to celebrate the life of Genny O’Donnell who died on December 21, 2019. Each person who spoke shared about their unique experience with Genny, and each shared experiences in common. They described her listening, her humor, her creativity, her philosophy and beliefs. Each described being real and respected together.

I carry cherished memories of knowing and feeling known by Genny. When I met her in the summer of 2007, I was nearly the age Genny was when she died. I considered myself to be a person with a disability who was re-entering the workforce in tiny steps. I embraced a recovery orientation in theory and struggled to live it in practice in my own life. I was also a novice in offering others support from the space of authentic equality. Genny joined with me as I was, both the stage and state of me.

During high school my life was interrupted by psychiatric diagnosis and treatment. I didn’t finish my senior year due to hospitalizations. When my peers began careers in college, work, or peacemaking in relation to racism and the Vietnam War, I sank into a career as a long term mental patient. A few years later, through no wisdom or action of my own, I met a psychologist who gave me an opportunity to switch careers. I found that work was key for that transition. Education supported my trajectory to find work that rang true for my aspirations and spiritual quest.

After many years of education and increasingly meaningful work, sometimes interrupted by psychiatric treatment and hospitalizations, my shame at perceived failures and my supporters’ conviction that I needed protection, convinced me that I needed to give up work and apply for a disability status. At that time, disability was not conceived as a stage, a step or pause in one’s journey, it meant accepting the end of hopes and dreams for meaningful participation and contribution in society. Nineteen years after applying for permanent and total disability status, I met Genny.

I began working a few evening hours a week at the CHOC. My “work ethic” hadn’t waivered—I retained conscientious standards about my relationship to “disabled worker” status. In February of 2008, shortly before I was scheduled to begin CPS training, I entered the psych unit of a local hospital. I was shocked when I realized that it was my scheduled day at the CHOC, and I hadn’t yet called Genny. My voice quivered with shame when I phoned her. She replied in a matter-of-fact tone, saying that she would see me when I returned.

At her memorial I heard my experience voiced by many different people, using different personal examples that painted a bigger picture of her essence in relationship, her heart engaged in respectful, mutual acceptance and mutual love.

I grieve for Genny O’Donnell in the same way I grieve for our planet and all her inhabitants. It’s a grief that both hurts and energizes; it includes pain, humor, and creative responses to huge crises, losses, and entanglements. I never know whether my presence or actions can influence an outcome for myself or for those I love; I know that I can never ensure any outcome. And I know that I must be and do what I can. Genny lived and loved with no exceptions. She trusted our limitations and believed in power beyond any individual. Everyone who met her, resonated with and reflected the light from her beautiful spirit. Collectively we will always be more because of her presence.

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Genny O'Donnell was the Director of the Coordinated Homeless Outreach Center (CHOC) in Montgomery County, PA.

