

# Randy Lizotte shares his story to help others

## *Empowerment through Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (I/DD) Peer Support*



At the age of 9 months old the course of Randy Lizotte's life was dramatically altered. A car accident left him with a traumatic brain injury.

Fast forward to today and Randy, who works at Northwestern Counseling & Support Services (NCSS) and facilitates the Next Step Self Advocates, has significantly impacted advocacy efforts and peer mentoring not only in the northwestern region but throughout Vermont.

It was Randy's parents that shaped his views on what is possible. Growing up as one of 9 children in the household his parents labored over how to treat him relative to their other 8 children. They decided to treat Randy the same. This instilled the foundation of how Randy viewed himself and empowered him to achieve future goals for community engagement and inclusion.

As you might imagine, Randy's journey has been fraught

with periods of self-doubt and depression. However, resilience and a desire to see other individuals with I/DD succeed and for their voices to be heard brings him satisfaction.

By sharing their own lived experience and practical guidance, peer mentors help people develop their own goals while creating and building fulfilling lives. In addition, empowering individuals with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities to achieve their goals for employment, inclusion, and community engagement.

Stacey Steady, Service Coordinator, Quality Care Team, Developmental Services Division, said, "Randy has developed great relationships within the peer group. He's someone that the members have confidence in asking for help or advice. He always turns things back to them, so they feel like they are coming up with solutions themselves."

### **The Self-Advocate Movement**

Randy has one principle of self-advocacy that he lives by "nothing about us without us". As with NCSS, all the Vermont Care Partner network of Designated and Specialized Service Agencies collaborate with self-advocacy groups.

### **Green Mountain Self-Advocates**

Randy began his advocacy work over 20 years ago with Green Mountain Self-Advocates (GMSA), Vermont's statewide self-advocacy organization. He has held every officer position and recently retired as President. GMSA started in Burlington, VT as one small self-advocacy group. By 1994, allies helped the Burlington group connect with other Vermont self-advocates to create a network. Together, they started self-advocacy groups in St. Albans, Barre, Middlebury, and Rutland. Today their office is in Montpelier and they have more than 22 local peer support groups across the state and over 600 self-advocates speaking up for themselves on matters impacting individuals with I/DD.

Amber Schaeffler, LICSW, MCI, Developmental Services Clinical Program manager, notes, "Green Mountain Self-Advocates has a wealth of information that benefits us here at NCSS and the state of Vermont. GMSA has supported NCSS on several projects and we are thankful to have such a great collaboration with them."

### **Next Step Self Advocates**

Next Step Self Advocates is a peer-managed support group, facilitated by Randy Lizotte, that offers individuals an opportunity to form new relationships and participate in an array of group activities. These include weekly meetings, social events, problem-solving exercises, self-improvement trainings, leadership conferences, community service, and advocacy initiatives to improve disability awareness and services.

## What people are saying:

*"The peers gave me hope. If they can be independent, then I can too."*

*"My peers make me feel valued. I feel good about myself because someone is listening to me."*

*"Just having someone who understands what I'm going through helps me to cope."*

*"I'm learning to be more independent from someone who's been through those challenges."*

*"I want a life like everyone else. My peers help me speak up for myself."*

clients register to vote."



Randy Lizotte speaks at NCSS Legislative Breakfast, December 2022

discussed the importance of having funding and resources to support clients living as independently as possible, such as living in an apartment on their own with assistance only when necessary. Randy closed by emphasizing that there isn't adequate staff or funding to serve all of our clients therefore, he requested support for additional dollars in the FY24 budget.

### Unique experience and leadership ability

For someone who was told on numerous occasions that due to his circumstances, he'd be an invisible member of society, Randy has proven them wrong. As he became involved in advocating for individuals with I/DD, others began to realize the leadership skills that Randy possesses.

Today, Randy has a unique role at NCSS serving as an Administrative Assistant Peer for the Pathways Team. His roles include; facilitating a peer support group - Next Step Self Advocates, conducting staff trainings and independent living trainings for clients, and meeting with

"Next Step Self Advocates is a great place to increase your socialization skills, gain knowledge about your services at NCSS, and expand your advocacy skills before the Vermont legislature. We are fortunate to have Randy leading our Next Step Self Advocates group in our region.", said Amber Schaeffler.

Following the election and prior to the start of the 2023 legislative session, NCSS held a Legislative Breakfast in December 2022. This provided Randy with another opportunity to advocate for the importance of funding so individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities can live as independently as possible.

Randy stressed that Designated and Specialized Services Agencies need more peer support-focused services, and who better to help our clients with the things they need assistance with than someone who has had similar, if not the same experiences. He told them, "I was a part of an effort to help our

In addition, he

A flyer for Next Step Self Advocates Peer Support. The flyer is yellow with blue and orange accents. It features the organization's logo at the top, followed by the title "PEER SUPPORT" in large blue letters. Below the title is the tagline "Speak up for yourself, stand up for others, become a self advocate!". The flyer lists two meeting times: "MEETING FRIDAYS 9:30-11:00" at 130 FISHER POND RD. MABLE CONFERENCE ROOM, and "NEW! MEETING WEDNESDAYS 11:00-12:30" at 27 LOWER NEWTON ST. AOL ROOM 103. It also includes a list of benefits: "Peer-managed support group for adults with developmental and intellectual disabilities", "Partake in weekly meetings, social events, peer support, self-improvement trainings, leadership conferences and more!", and "Collaborate with state agencies, legislators, and national self-advocacy organizations to improve disability services and promote disability awareness." At the bottom, it provides contact information for Randy Lizotte, Peer Advocate, with the email Randy.Lizotte@ncss.vt.gov and phone number 802-309-7864.



incoming clients to ensure they have a familiar face in a sea of strangers.

The NCSS Diversity & Cultural Awareness Committee is sponsoring Peer Advocate Training on April 19<sup>th</sup>, which is one example of trainings that Randy facilitates. The training includes exercises such as, “myth busters”, “what we all have in common”, and “help me lighten my load”. One of Randy’s goals is to expand the training to outside organizations and the community.

ALL ARE WELCOME!



ALL ARE WELCOME!



Help me lighten my load exercise from training

According to Michelle Harms, Team Leader of Academy of Learning & Program for Adaptive and Expressive Arts, “Randy has such a unique position with NCSS where he is not just available during the Peer Support meetings but integrated into NCSS. He is a familiar face walking around the halls, providing staff trainings, and is available outside of Peer Support for anyone who might need him. Randy can advocate from within the agency.”

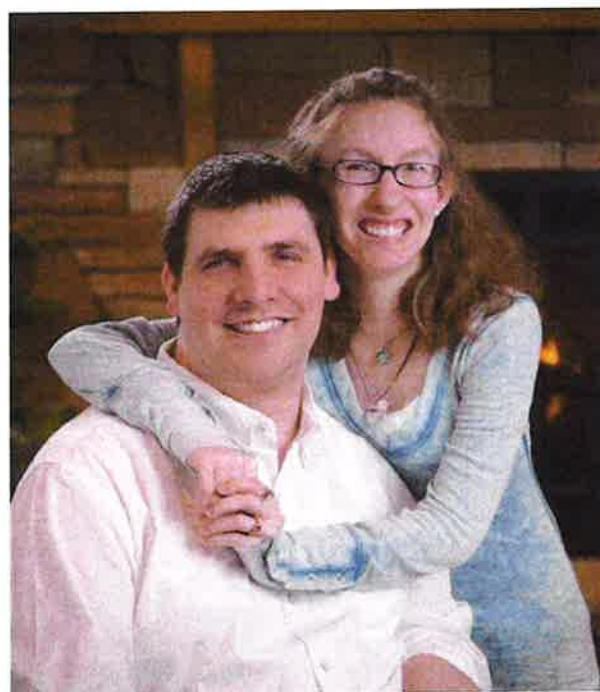
Among many of the statements made by his detractors, never getting married or living independently are among two where Randy has proven them wrong. Recently, he and his wife, Jana Weber Lizotte, celebrated their eight-year wedding anniversary. They reside in the City of St. Albans.

### Peer Services

Peer Services connects individuals receiving developmental services from NCSS with peer advocates and mentors. The mutual experiences that peers share of living with a disability helps individuals break down barriers and find solutions. Trusting relationships are naturally built based on the premise that, “You don’t have to do this alone.” Individuals find problem solving with their peers often reduces the need for more intensive services. This shift results in less reliance on services while providing opportunities for individuals to become more self-determined and independent; key components of achieving a fulfilling life.

The Peer Services team offers the following programs and options:

- Support for adult individuals to develop person-centered treatment plans
- Mentoring and mediation for individuals to navigate services
- Self-advocacy information for transition age youths
- Personal welcome for newly funded individuals
- Leadership and trainings for regional peer-managed support group



Randy and Jana Weber Lizotte

### Peer Partnerships

Individuals have the option of inviting a peer advocate to join their developmental services treatment team. Peer advocates help individuals speak up for themselves about their goals and dreams to develop a client-directed support plan.

### Raising Awareness

During Developmental Disabilities Awareness Month, Randy appeared as a guest on the *NCSS Here for You* television show to discuss his journey, the importance of people with lived experience serving as peer mentors, trainings that highlight differences and similarities, and the importance of advocacy.

After viewing the episode, one of Randy's siblings stated, "Great Job Randy! You really seem to know your stuff! Well spoken."

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# NORTHWESTERN COUNSELING & SUPPORT SERVICES

*we're here for you*

**About  
Northwestern  
Counseling &  
Support Services,  
Inc. (NCSS)**

Since 1958, NCSS, a private, non-profit, human services agency has been serving Franklin and Grand Isle Counties. NCSS provides intervention and support to children, adolescents, and adults with emotional and behavioral problems; a mental health diagnosis; adolescent substance use; and an intellectual disability or developmental delay. Over 500 staff members help over 4,000 people each year in 15 locations in collaboration with community partners. NCSS' 24/7/365 emergency services team and mobile outreach is available to meet the needs of Franklin and Grand

Isle County  
children, adults, and  
families in crisis by  
calling 802-524-  
6554 then press 1.

[www.nessinc.org](http://www.nessinc.org)

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for you.*

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