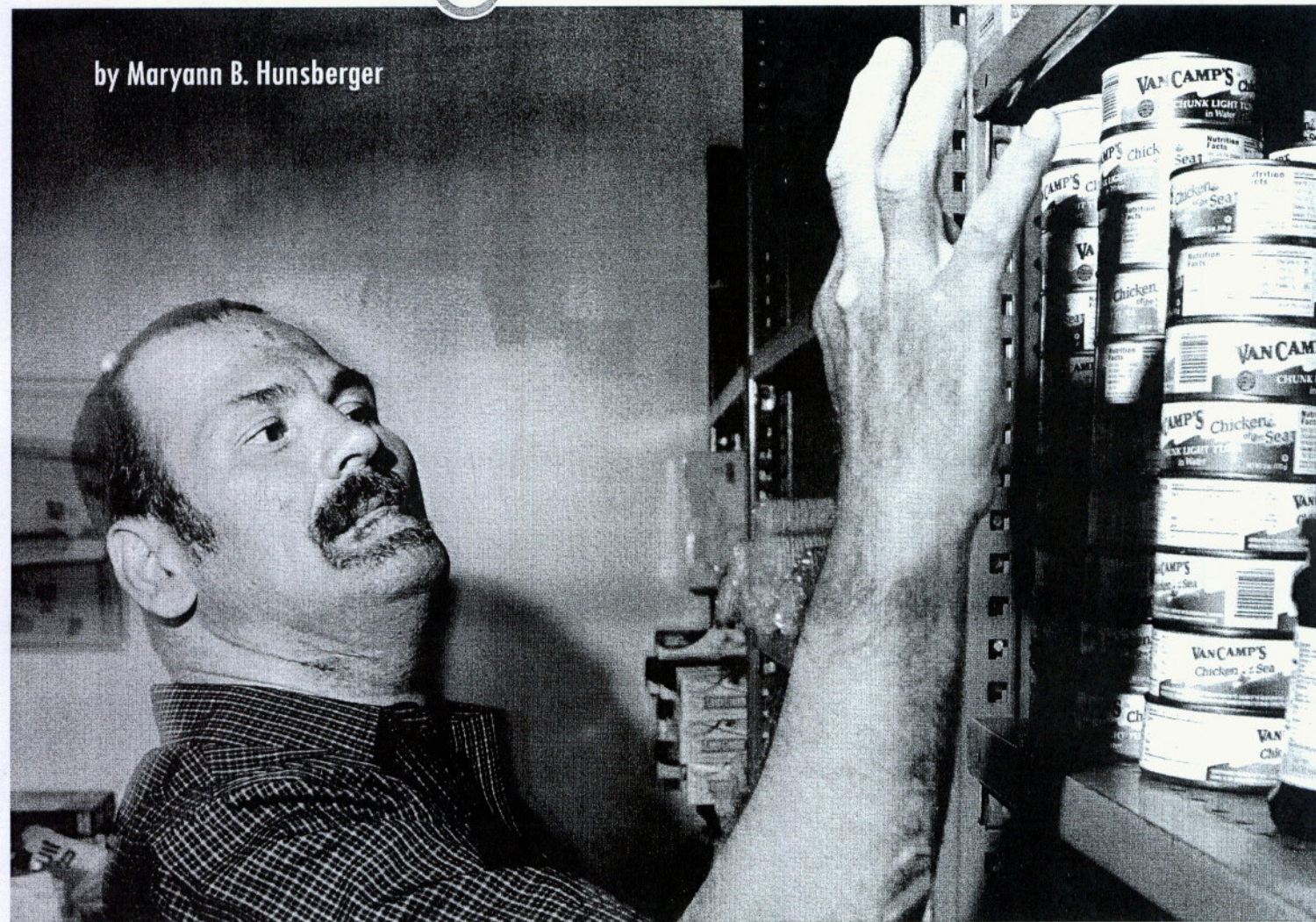


Finding His Own Path

by Maryann B. Hunsberger



“PIP showed me how to change the system.”

When he was growing up Dennis Larned, now 45, seemed destined for the same limited opportunities expected for many people with developmental disabilities at that time by teachers and other professionals affecting their early direction and guidance. But instead of earning piecemeal wages at a workshop, Larned chose to wash pots at a restaurant so he could earn a competitive salary.

They didn't get me ready for life," said Larned. So he's been doing that for himself, choosing to live on his own and make his own way as much as possible. He has lived in his own apartment for 24 years now.

Six months ago he moved into a new apartment in Somers Point. "I saw the ad in the paper and that was how I found the apartment."

Larned heard about the Council's Partners in Policymaking (PIP) seminars through Temple University when learning how to use new features on the most current Pathfinder—an electronic speech-generating tool he has been using for the past 15 years to help him communicate, since his disability makes it difficult for him to speak.

The Pathfinder is similar to a laptop computer. Once programmed with words, individuals can type words into it and it speaks. The device came in handy for the PIP sessions, which teach advocacy and policymaking skills to a group of individuals with developmental disabilities and family members. The PIP sessions are held one weekend a month over an eight-month period. Larned attended PIP in 2003.

"It was great. This was my first time going away like this. I loved it. It made me feel more independent. The thing I liked best was meeting people with disabilities and working with them. We worked on getting a bill passed. I went to a hearing at the State House. It was a blast! We had to write testimony. I took part in that. I'm just so-so at writing, so this was new and different."

Larned said that meeting parents of children with disabilities "helped me understand their feelings. I think it helped them to see an adult with a disability who could attend Partners in Policymaking and take part in it. I think it helped them see that their children could do things."

A key part of the Partners experience for Larned and the other participants is a better understanding of how government works. Larned uses his computer to write letters to his elected officials to advocate on issues important to him and the rest of the disability community.

"PIP showed me how to change the system."

This "Writing Advocacy" is another achievement Larned's former educators didn't expect of him. "At school, they didn't teach me to write well.

I didn't know what an essay was until I was an adult."

"I finally learned what an essay was and how to write one in community college. I worked hard and got an associate's degree."

Like many people with developmental disabilities, Larned, despite his education, has been unable to find employment.

"I have been looking for a job, but I can't get one. I'd like to work as an advocate. I am trying to start a business doing computer art. It isn't going well so far. I guess my cerebral palsy gets in the way. The hardest thing for me is going in for a job and them just seeing my cerebral palsy. There is much, much more to me than cerebral palsy.

He spends time with his friends from church and friends he's made through Community Quest, an organization in Egg Harbor Township. "I see my friends every day."

"My hopes for the future are to find a non-profit that will let me do their computer artwork. I know this is a field I could work in and be a success. I don't know if school will help with that, but I'm hoping. I plan to start school in the fall. I'd like to get a bachelor's degree at Stockton. People may look at me as a somebody if I have a bachelor's."

Larned said that without a job, money is hard to come by. "It's very expensive to live, so I really want a job."

Larned appreciates the beauty of living near the shore but he feels isolated from advocacy activities.

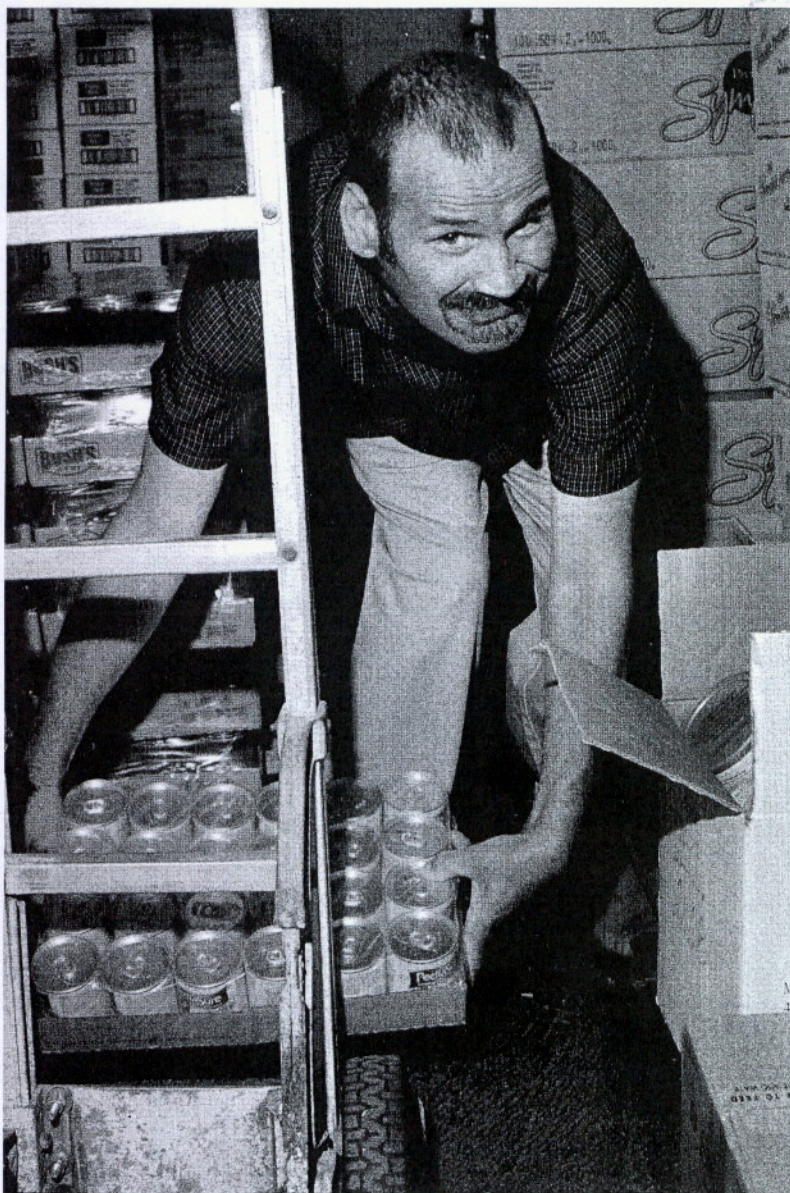
"Nothing is near me. I wish I had a Monday Morning group near me. I tried to find people to work on a project. I feel I would be great at making flyers because I am good on the computer."

Larned does stay busy in his community. Once a week, he volunteers at a food bank. "I do

anything they need, including handing out food to people. It is near where I live. They have a warehouse and that's where I go to volunteer."

He's also an usher on Sunday mornings at Linwood Community Church, and serves as the treasurer of the church's Bible study group for adults with cognitive disabilities.

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Working at the Community Food Bank of New Jersey at Egg Harbor Twp., Larned helps stock the shelves and move cans with a cart.

Bonnie Young, supportive living coordinator at Community Quest, works with Larned in the supportive living program. They help him get to doctors' visits and help him balance his banking. They also work with Larned to set goals for healthy choices in eating and cooking.

"We provide recipes or he looks them up online," said Young. "We help him with meal planning to improve his overall health. Staff goes in and helps him make purchases and helps him cook or teaches him to cook."

Larned recently took part in a camping weekend in Cape May with his friends from Community Quest. "That was fun. We also ride bikes, go bowling and we have gone to the Statue of Liberty."

Elizabeth Ernst works with Larned 30 hours a week as an assistant. Larned found Ernst, who works with the Personal Preference Program at Community Access Unlimited, through a home health agency. She does laundry, cooking and cleaning. She sometimes takes him grocery shopping. Larned receives funding through Medicaid each month to hire his assistant.

"I decide how much to pay my home health aide and if there is anything left over, I use that money for laundry and the bus. Nancy Lamorgia of Community Access Unlimited is my consultant. She helps me write my budget plans. She comes every three months."

"It's difficult for him to cook because he has a hard time opening things, cutting things and holding things," said Ernst. "He's a great person. I love working for him. He uses the Pathfinder all the time. I'm used to that now. It's not hard to understand. Dennis uses the computer a lot when I am there. The computer is his lifeline. It's an important part of his life. He communicates with other people and does a lot online."

Larned admits the computer is a big asset in his life.

"I do everything on the computer. I like to create computer art, so I've made business cards for people on my computer. I like the internet, too. I like chatting with people. It's easier to chat online than in person. I type well. I like to send and receive email, too. I like to instant message a lot." **P&F**