

Background

Rosemary Kavanagh has been employed at CNIB for over 16 years and is a seven year member of AER . Her involvement with services to blind and visually impaired people predates CNIB developing the first networked service for public libraries in North America for talking book services to blind and print handicapped people across 93 communities in Ontario and serving on a Ministry of Culture and Citizenship Committee in 1984 which published guidelines for building accessible libraries. As the Director of Technology Strategies, Ministry of Culture and Citizenship, Ontario, led the provincial technology plan for Ontario's libraries which also addressed the needs of blind and print handicapped people. In recent years her focus at CNIB was rescoping CNIB'S services to a single national vision to improve the client and professional experience in rehabilitation services through a centralized contact centre and client relations management system. One of the high points of her career was the digital transformation of CNIBs library services using state of the art technologies. She contributed to the transformation of the client's learning experiences by introducing far more information in many different formats than they had ever experienced before such as an online catalogue and electronic newspapers nationwide. For blind people, access to information is one of the central issues to functioning effectively and successfully. CNIB's Library won awards from professional associations nationally and internationally and great respect from Microsoft and other technology leaders. Rosemary has contributed significantly internationally helping other blindness organizations and libraries in Asia, the Caribbean and Europe to advance access to information for blind people. There can be no greater contribution than creative and dedicated professionals smoothing the path for those who are disabled through visionary services and staying ahead of the game on their behalf. On behalf of AER she engaged the future development of our professionals in vision rehabilitation last year at AER. Rosemary has retired from CNIB and now has her own company ERK Consulting Inc and continues to be an active member of AER and serves on the Program Advisory Committee of the American Foundation for the Blind.

Acceptance of Spirit Award Remarks

Let me begin by saying how deeply honoured I am to receive this award. I believe very much that we are here to enhance the experience of our clients through good strategic practice no matter where they are or who they are and no matter what organization you represent. That is the fundamental role of AER and its divisions or affiliates. The fact that we focus on the professional side is the right tactic and good strategic practice gets us there.

You may wonder what this means –when I joined CNIB and became involved in rehabilitation work what I saw were practitioners deeply passionate about what they did and so deep into the practice they had time for little else. We were so

into practice that we couldn't see the train coming, we didn't have the energy to get on it, nor the time to think about where it was going. Your passion however, was what drove me – I had such respect for those bound and determined to make the world a better place for some of us challenged by our own circumstances. And I believe – passionately- that the best societies are measured by the way they treat their most vulnerable.

So I asked myself how could I contribute, what could I do?

I knew that passion was not enough – what does it gain an organization if it has good intentions but loses its soul?

Three things resonated with me.

First we had great professionals doing great work but they were often limited by the very structures around them. In other words their organizations sometimes unwittingly and inadvertently created barriers to their excellence.

Second -Were we winning the war against societal acceptance of people living with visionloss? There were great gains along the way - can we sustain the gains and continue to do great work?

Third – how could we use modern technology better – other services have done so well with it yet in health and rehabilitation we lag behind. We didn't engage good strategic practice in implementing technology and aligning it with our professionals.

My entire work has always been about enhancing the client experience – making things better. As you may know I have retired from CNIB but in developing their new service model based on a nationwide client relations management system we were enhancing both the client and the professional experience. We wanted to decrease the waiting time for clients, particularly those experiencing trauma through recent visionloss, enhance their experience by always being on top of their needs and serve more of them using the expertise all across CNIB.

For our professionals we wanted to give them more time with the client and less time in duties that could be easily managed by technology. Best of all we wanted to give them great information about their clients experiences so they could build better services and strengthen their professional knowledge and resolve.

I was using technology to help - to introduce our rehabilitation workers to new tools that would validate their philosophy of care, make it affordable, make it deliverable. And I was using strategy to - reconfigure the service itself to help our professionals be better and more satisfied with what they were doing. It was a new world for many still caught in the old one. But change is like that.

But there was another dimension that I was determined to lead and that was the professional development and validation of all who worked in vision rehabilitation and I felt that AER was where they gathered, where they reflected and where they ought to be encouraged. This was what inspired last years symposium at AER – bringing all the key stakeholders in the profession together to reflect on a strategy for enriching the training and skill building of our professionals i.e. validating the importance of who they are and the work they do. It is up to AER to build the vision, the tactics and resolve.

As a dedicated profession we are great on compassion, wonderful on empathy, stellar on knowing what we had to do for our clients but we were weak on strategy. We are practitioners, not strategists, not technocrats, and our world was slipping by as others claiming to be more skilled, more visionary, more qualified than we were overtook our path. Over the last 200 years these practitioners in visionloss developed the techniques, the skills to mitigate blindness and visionloss for people of all ages but suddenly we began to realize that something was changing and we had no strategy to address it.

My message to AER and all of us is to take the great will of our organization, the sum of its Chapters and - focus - find the big audacious goals that unite and go after the things we do well so we can preserve our advantage in them. It is not enough to gather to share information. We need to build great strategic practice for the profession through AER. There are binding issues, common concerns that cause us to be here today and we need to focus and resolve them - because no one else will.

If this Award means that you understood my passion then I truly feel commended for it and I thank you all for recognizing the spirit that drives us all who dedicate our time to vision rehabilitation.

Rosemary Kavanagh
ERK Consulting Inc