Reflection on Dan Barry’s “The Boys in the Bunkhouse”

For most people, the perspective of seeing someone with an intellectual disability is often on the outside looking in. However, I have had the good fortune to see someone up close and personal treat intellectually disabled people with dignity and respect — my father. From these experiences and those life stories from “The Boys in the Bunkhouse” by Dan Barry, I learned that like you and me, people with intellectual disabilities desire the simplest and most universal wish anyone hopes to obtain. To live their life.

Clifford L. (my dad), picks up his talkative daughter daily from high school like clockwork. He listens to her as she drones on about her friends, the newest high school drama gossip and that one darn math class that’s always been her
Achilles heel. In the meantime, he drives to his job, a human services organization as he subtly switches from the title of “daddy” to “Medicaid Service Coordinator.” Once again, he continues his tasks at hand as a social worker in Rochester, N.Y., an occupation he’s been dedicated to for almost 30 years.

Though I always complained about staying with my father at work after school, I had the rare opportunity to see him work. Usually that meant watching him toil away over cringe-worthy piles of paperwork at his desk as I averted my eyes from my heart-wrenching math work I had before me. However, on certain occurrences, I would be picked up from school to see another person in the car with me - “Kelvin” - a consumer of my father’s agency who perseverates about Michael Jackson (who can blame him) and still waits with bated breath when my father will bestow to him that divine white glove his idol wore. One of these days, Kelvin. One of these days. He also just recently graduated with an IEP (Individualized Education Plan) diploma, something “the boys” never had a chance to receive due to their negligent employer.

Then there’s “Devin,” another man I would see my father occasionally drive around. He is a 25-year-old freckled-faced man with Down syndrome who also had the opportunity to get an IEP. Although he used to clean tables at a KFC, he now participates in sheltered workshops. These workshops are programs run by
trained professional that improve the vocational skills of disabled people. No Randy Neubauer’s as far as the eye can see.

The times I saw my father go the extra mile for his consumers were the times I learned and enjoyed the most. I recall a memorable time when I assisted my dad in bringing a couch in for a family “on a hot July day.” I also remember delivering a pizza to a family who had no food. I was happily there helping, watching, and learning with him. As for something akin to the Atalissa Days (but with no mean-spirited clown costumes) or the Christmas event at the bunkhouse (but not secretly holding the event to quell media outrage), those moments were there, too.

The organization my father works for has special events for intellectually disabled people and their families. Though there’s one held in the summer and another during Christmastime, the one I’ve been fortunate enough to volunteer at many times is Harvest Fest. Held every November, the event places many of those with disabilities in the spotlight as they are given time to show off their various talents. I’m sure this is a highlight of the year. It parallels “the boys” picking out their favorite foods from a local mart or having a night on the town, even though it’s a basic human right. I look forward to going to the Harvest event. It’s nice to see so many happy faces having a good time as compared to the
atrocities of Willowbrook and the hardships each “boy” endured in the bunkhouse. Hopefully, even with the rigors of college, I hope to see Kelvin jam out to “Beat It” again this year.

Over the years I observed my father assisting people with intellectual disabilities while always witnessing the constant treatment of these individuals. From watching him, I have seen that these individuals are no different from anyone else. They want to love and be loved, to have friends, to have fun, and to live life to the fullest. I'm sure that if we took a step back more often to see these similarities in human beings transcending above just the idea of mental disabilities, the world wouldn't be as cold and callous as it is today. That the world would be full of Harvest Fests. Full of love.