

Like Nike says, “Just Do It”

That’s exactly what Nena White did November 4th – November 7th, 2013 in Mt Sterling, Ohio.

A journey to self-awareness started with a four-hour road trip marked with laughs, road construction, singing oldies and passing our destination. Finally we arrived at Ohio Self-determination Association or OSDA’s Project STIR training. About 30 people of varying ability from all over Ohio and their support person came together to receive intensive training to become advocates.

Day one Nena was soaking it all in, she remained quiet and reserved, hesitant to say anything, but listened intently to the guidelines for training that were being created. She passively took part in activities that highlighted ways to speak up for ones self. After a long day of driving and training Nena dined with her support persons, Nicole Nedasky and Deb Gordon and another Portage County self advocate in training Brandon Boyett at the Lodges fine dining room which overlooked a beautiful lake. Meeting up with a few others at the fireplace Nena began to step out of her shell; playing games that encouraged getting to know a stranger and sharing aloud that she had learned of that person. We wrapped up the evening with a cupcake and engaging conversation in our room.

Awaking early and ready to go it was this day that it became clear that Nena was the most organized and prepared among us. This day was filled with many skits that targeted communication; Self-advocacy; problem solving, being assertive as opposed to aggressive or passive, and rights and responsibilities. Stepping out of her comfort zone, Nena spoke and read aloud to the group, worked in small groups, actively (with props and all) participated in skits and made friends with Patrick and Annette. In fact, after training, we hiked Deer Creek Park with Annette and enjoyed eating dinner with our new friend. Nena shared gorgeous photos she had taken of our surroundings and of her and her brother Steven, whom she recently visited in Texas. It was apparent that Nena was becoming more assertive, speaking up for herself. After some more get to know each other activities and silly minute to win it games, some of us decided to hit the pool and hot tub. Nena enjoyed a quiet evening to herself face booking and reading.

By day three, the training focus shifted from individual advocacy to a more global approach, such as working toward how to start or enhance self-advocacy groups once we returned home. Nena identified that her current group back home, Stepping Up: Leading With Abilities, could benefit from her organizational skills. She plans to offer the scheduling of those meetings using her computer and cell phone. During the afternoon of day three the focus was heavy on teaching others, educating policy makers and the advocates job from that point on. Asking for the microphone

Nena shared her idea to meet with her cousin Loretta, support provider Marsha Thomas, and her SSA to get a plan of ideas that she can present to the Library board where she works. NENA WAS SPEAKING UP NOW, showing confidence in herself and her ideas, displaying compassion and support to her peers. For example, when Brandon knew what he wanted to say but was becoming frustrated, she leaned over and told him something she had learned, "take a deep break, just take your time" and he did, and he spoke his mind!

Nena independently worked toward a timeline of goals for Portage County advocacy when paired with Ashland County. Although nervous, she admits to overcoming her fears. After writing, reading, prioritizing and sharing, Nena came up with the idea to find out what it takes to schedule a conversation with Ravenna's mayor about Project STIR and self-advocacy!

Day three was not all hard work though, after some relaxing back in the room, we got our party clothes on and headed to the dance, then to the Lodges' bar and grille to catch the remainder of the Country Music Awards with some new friends, like Ryan. We did some networking too, with Mike from Franklin County who has been organizing bake sale fundraisers at the workshop that bring in up to \$500.00 for Operation Feed.

Like pros by day four, we learned that we could sleep in a bit and still be on time for breakfast and training. Folder in hand, name-tag on place, excited and proud, Nena opted to head down to training alone ahead of her roomies. Day four was an exciting day---Graduation!

We developed our advocacy PATH; starting with identifying what life is like now for people with disabilities. Poor wages, low hour hours at work, discrimination, no transportation, places still not accessible to people's needs, etc. Identifying who in our life can help us to achieve our destination, goals, recognizing ways to build strength, what action can be taken in the next few months, plan for next month and commit to the first step now. Nena's first step is to call Loretta to determine if she can be a person that could help her on her path. Her plan for next month is to write an article about her training experience.

Nena White is an Ohio Leader! Trained in advocacy, organized by nature, supported by people in her life, she plans to do great things for herself and for others with disabilities in Portage County.

Nena is a graduate from Rootstown High School. She has worked for Reed Memorial Library for 25 years. She likes Garth Brooks, and country music, reality shows, Bingo Bash, reading, COACH bags, diet coke, sleeping till noon on Fridays off work, Wheel of Fortune, visiting her family, Facebook, and clothes shopping online.

Look for updates from this self-advocacy trainer in PCBDD newsletter, *Expressions*, at portagedd.org, Facebook group, Stepping Up: Leading with Abilities.