A Beautiful Story:
Pacific Islanders Accessing Rehabilitation - Involvement in Postsecondary Supports That Eventually Relate to Quality Employment

Introduction: Shirley’s Story

The compilation of this story involved research and interviews with six different persons – Shirley Doneza; her parents Ed and Martha; Father Mac, a friend and employer; Lisa Yogi, an instructor at Honolulu Community College (HCC); and Diane Caulfield, her counselor at HCC. (The summarized statements and quotations that follow are all directly from the interviews).

This Story begins with Ed Doneza, who at the age of 17 years, was living in the Philippines. He decided he wanted a better life for himself and so enlisted in the U.S. Navy. He also decided to keep his “nose clean” or “stay out of trouble” for the simple that he wanted to receive an honorable discharge. After years of service, he decided to make Hawaii his home and he brought his parents, and later, some extended family members to Hawaii. Eventually he met and married Martha, and together they have three children – all girls. Their youngest daughter, Shirley, is special.

After Shirley was born, the doctor told Ed and Martha that there was “something wrong with her” because she showed signs of developmental delay. After 6 months this was confirmed and at 3 years old, Shirley still did not speak. “Anything you tell her, it was just like talking to a person who cannot hear and doesn’t understand,” said Ed. “She didn’t behave like other children, so we tried to teach her. My wife and I cried and couldn’t understand why our first two daughters were brilliant and in college. We also prayed that God would help us not to be so depressed. We did not force her, yet we gave her responsibilities.” Chores included cleaning, feeding and taking care of the animals (rabbits, a dog and birds). “In kindergarten her teacher said that because she could not write or follow instructions, she suggested we keep her in kindergarten another year. We
got in touch with Ivalee Sinclair, who was an advocate for Special Education at that time. In order for us to help her” he Ed said, “we needed to educate ourselves.” After a meeting and discussion with Ms. Sinclair, Shirley was diagnosed as having a “learning disability,” so in the first grade she was transferred to the special education class. “When school time came we both talked to the therapist and found that Shirley had a learning disability. During evaluation time, we asked about resources to guide her and we prayed at home, that with God’s help, she would do well,” said Martha.

Ed continued explaining that because he and Martha were so involved with Shirley and wanted to learn to help her, some of the teachers thought they were “making trouble.” “I especially asked so many questions,” Ed said, “because I was curious. One teacher asked me in a sarcastic manner: ‘What do you want?’ I answered: ‘I hope you’re not talking to me.’ And she said: ‘Every time you come, and I explain to the principal – what’s the problem?’ I didn’t think that teacher, or any other teacher, should talk that way, so I complained to the principal and to Ms. Sinclair. The following year, we didn’t see that teacher at the school. All we wanted to do was share our supports.”

Ed explained how they were active in meeting with Shirley’s teachers in Special Education (SPED) all the way through intermediate school, only to find out that again there was “no progress.” “She couldn’t read or count but we weren’t blaming anybody. The teachers were trying their best, and they had very sad faces, like saying there’s nothing we can do. So it was up to us, the parents. My wife has a college education. She’s a pharmacist. I graduated from high school. What could we do?”

Ed remembered how they played games with Shirley, spoke nicely to her, and how they prayed with Shirley every night to God. “We told her that she could learn, but very, very slow. For example,” he said, “You might want to lift this table, but you cannot by yourself, but Mommy and I get on either side of you and together I bet we can do it, together. We are with you, you can learn and when we are lifting the table she smiles and says: ‘Yeah, I strong.’ She was beginning to understand, but that was only the first step of many.” At home, both Ed and Martha helped Shirley with her homework and by the time she was in intermediate school, she had learned to print her name and recognize it if she saw it. If there was a letter missing she could fill in the correct letter.

At Radford High School, Shirley was learning how to count. Ed explained: “I bought her a calculator with large numbers and worked with her, an together we pressed #1, the plus sign, then #1 again, then the equal sign and she sees the answer - #2. She was catching on real fast,” said Mr. Doneza. “Then her teacher told me not to use the calculator because she has to know how she got what she got. Shirley learned and memorized the whole multiplication tables by using the calculator.” (Different strokes for different folks?) Mr. Doneza described himself as a very emotional person, with the tendency to be loud. Because of this, Shirley always thought he was angry with her. Mr. Doneza remarked that Shirley has changed him, because he realized he would do anything for her, even if he had to change and not speak so loud and keep his emotions in check. “The bottom line,” Ed admits, “is you can’t be mean, can’t show anger or disappointment. You have to be understanding, loving, have some discipline. You can’t be too lenient, things have to be
explained. All along we tried to work together, and to show our daughter there’s a good relationship between my wife and I. We all continued to pray together, asking and thanking God for his help.”

Shirley shared that when she was in high school, she made the decision to go to college: “I was determined that I was going to finish – at least get my certificate.” Her parents, she confides, supported her 100% by saying that whatever happens, they were behind her. She realized how fortunate she was to have such parents, as many friends who were with her in her special education classes, did not receive this kind of support. A teacher in high school always gave her encouragement, and told her: “You can do anything, as long as you put your mind to it.” “She also said she would pray for me,” continues Shirley, “and hoped that everything I did in life would be successful. Even if I’m not always successful, she told me not to let that stop me from trying anything. I was the only one from my graduating class at Radford who went to Honolulu Community College. After eight years, I received my Education Assistant (EA) Certificate in Early Childhood Education.”

Diane Caulfield, an academic counselor at HCC, was another support. When Shirley realized it was best if she only took one or two courses per semester, Mrs. Caulfield agreed and helped her find the right class(es) and teacher(s). Mrs. Caulfield also expressed during the interview, that she could see Shirley really wanted to work with children. She noticed that she had this desire to give, and her family was very supportive. “Many times she would come with her father, and you could see his love and concern for her, and the family’s belief in her, which helped her to be a success and make it through school.”

Shirley says that at first college was difficult, so Mrs. Caulfield encouraged her and helped her by seeking additional help at the tutoring center. (Tutors are students who support without doing the student’s work for them – personality compatibility is necessary.) After trying several tutors, or as she says: “shopping around because some were just too smart for me,” Shirley finally decided on one who not only understood her and was nice, but was also a good personality match.

While attending classes at HCC, Shirley also belonged to a support group. This was comprised of friends who helped each other with assignments. Helping others really gave her a good feeling, in contrast to the many times in her life she had been only on the receiving end.

Another support while at HCC, was Lisa Yogi, Shirley’s teacher in early childhood education. Shirley described her as a terrific teacher who was patient and took time outside of class to help her with her lessons. This teacher also shared stories of herself in which Shirley found comfort. Mrs. Yogi stated that Shirley was “expressive, and had a happy disposition. She also had a willingness to learn.” The area where help was needed the most was her written assignments, so Mrs. Yogi gave her feedback. Shirley asked questions and tried hard to improve.
The realization that her parents wouldn’t be around forever, and that she had to do something for herself, so that she could take care of herself and be more responsible, were the driving forces within Shirley, by her own account. She stated: “It’s like a voice within saying: ‘You can do it, you can do it, keep going, hang in there, you can finish.’ So I chose education, because I was in special education and I know how frustrating it is when you have a teacher who doesn’t really understand you.”

Father McNeely, the pastor and headmaster at Holy Family Parish Church and School, has known Shirley well over ten years. Presently, she works part-time in their after-school program. He shared that she is great with the children. She is kind, enthusiastic, and all the children enjoy her. She also works part-time at Salt Lake Elementary School as a substitute education assistant in their special education program.

Another success in her life came when Shirley studied, passed the test and received her driver’s license. She drove to meet me for this interview at the University of Hawaii, and was so happy to share this success. When she got her license, her father rewarded her, with her own car. Martha, Shirley’s mom, said: “My daughter cleans and keeps her car in good running condition.” Shirley shared with me that she has studied the components on the engine, the brakes, how to change a tire, and just about everything else about her car, and now she wishes all her friends could drive too. “I am at a point in my life that I have encouraged others to keep working and learning so they will feel good but more so they can support themselves.” This was, and continues to be, a beautiful story.

**Problem Statement**

This paper will attempt to examine the topics of education, women and culture, as they relate to Shirley’s success story. The framework used will be that of a descriptive study and literature review of the three topics, as they relate to this specific woman and her life situation. It would be impossible in this limited study to cover all aspects of these three topics, so a directed literature search concerning disabilities and vocational education/rehabilitation was carried out, focusing on women and Asian American/Pacific Islanders (specifically the Filipino culture) and the information gathered was examined in light of Shirley’s specific experiences.

**Literature Review**

As Pat Morrissey said in her keynote address, “Beliefs are going to determine our actions.” (Morrissey, 2002) This is the phrase that kept coming back to me as I reviewed written material on the topics of vocational education and rehabilitation. Our beliefs, as educators, and our clients’ beliefs, as well as those of their families and communities, all come together to influence how each individual’s life story progresses. Whether the person is a “success” or not, is seen from the individual’s own perspective – their beliefs about their culture and community, and whether they have achieved personal goals.

Using Shirley’s story as a focus, I have divided my review into three broad areas in which the literature seemed to fall: Education (as it relates to Shirley’s experiences);
Women (as a secondary disability for Shirley); and Culture, specifically Asian American/Pacific Islander cultures vs. Western cultures (as an influence on Shirley’s school and employment experiences). In this short space I cannot hope to cover any of these topics in great detail, but will focus on areas of each as they relate to Shirley’s own belief system interacted with these three areas. Hopefully, this brief review will raise some issues for future consideration and discussion.

**Education**

According to the U.S. Census, “the more education a person has, the lower the chances for unemployment” (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001). In the 2000 Executive Summary Report on Postsecondary Education and Employment for Students with Disabilities, sponsored by NIDRR, level of education is closely linked to employment rate for people with disabilities (Stodden, 1999). Hart, et. al. restates this link, adding that people with and without disabilities who complete postsecondary education and vocational programs, enhance their development of self-esteem and increase the likelihood of obtaining employment. Participation in postsecondary education for both groups was more likely higher due to the parents’ levels of education, income and high school graduation status (Hart, Gilmore, Zafft and Bose, 2000). The Disabilities Statistics Center (1997) and the U.S. Department of Labor (1999) both confirm that postsecondary education increases earnings for the general population. The research in this area has also found that postsecondary education increases the earnings and hours worked for individuals with disabilities within the Vocational Rehabilitation system. In 1998, Benz, et. al. reported that their findings indicated three factors predicted better outcomes for young men and women with disabilities: increased self-esteem at exit from school, continuing instruction in personal-social skills and continuing instruction in vocational skills (Benz, Doran, and Yovanoff, 1998).

As one would expect, Shirley’s own evaluation of the value of education in her success story stood out as the major component for her, the area she returned to again and again when asked about who or what contributed to her success. Her parents and teachers were mentioned over and over, included in all aspects of her life. The value of education is taken for granted in Western Societies, but, according to Shirley, it is of great importance in the Filipino community, and Cheng, et. al. notes that “Filipinos place a high importance on education” (Cheng, Nakasato, and Wallace, 1995). Shirley may have taken longer than some to reach her educational goals, but she persisted to the end, with the continuous support of her parents and a long line of caring educators.

**Women**

“When we touch the face of the poorest of the poor, it is a woman’s face, often a minority woman’s face” (Hawaii State Commission on the Status of Women, 1987). And to continue this thought, it is a minority woman with a disability. Kay Schriner, in her article on the international view of disabilities, states that: “In many developing nations, conditions for women with disabilities are worse than for disabled men.” She continues by stating that women with disabilities are worse both generally and specifically with
regard to economic self-sufficiency and they often have limited, or no, access to health care (Schriner, 2002). Being female was mentioned, by many sources, as a possible second disability, with the implication that it is often not addressed but should be. I want to add to this, by saying that we should ponder being female as one disability, having a disability as another and being a minority member, as a third. This situation is unacceptable. “It is time to identify and provide the instruction and support these young women need to lead successful adult lives” (Weiss, 1991, in Benz, 1998).

Shirley had all three strikes against her, yet she succeeded. When we examine her support system, several possibilities stand out that could have given her the ability to overcome these obstacles, in addition to the fact that she had parental and educational supports. The first possibility is that her success stems from the fact that her father was her primary parental supporter, and he seems to have spent the most time with her. Coming form a male perspective, as well as the perspective of an individual without a disability, he may have instilled in Shirley more confidence than her female teachers, because he expected her to succeed. Males tend to display more goal-directed behaviors, and he was genuinely pleased with each new ability she mastered, whereas her mother or teachers may have been less enthusiastic in their praise, as they probably had more complex views of the implications of her learning, as it impacted all areas of her life. (Female behavior is often less goal-directed and more all-encompassing then male behavior.)

Another area of support for Shirley is the fact that her parents not only supported her, but that they supported her in her own choices of what he educational goals were. According to Benz, et. al., the young women who were employed and successful were often those whose parents agreed with that woman’s choice of education and type of work (Benz, et. al., 1998). It is interesting to note that during all of my time with Shirley, and during all of my interviews with her family, teachers, and employers, not once did anyone mention the fact that Shirley is female.

Shirley was engaged in a somewhat gender-stereotypical role – that of a teacher to young children. Most teachers of young children are women, but this occupation is less predictably stereotyped than those roles of secretary, waitperson, housecleaner, etc. Benz reported that females, in general, were less likely than males to be involved in occupation-specific training during high school, unless it was training in gender-stereotypical jobs (Benz, et. al., 1998). Schriner talks about the need for fundamental social changes for women, before changes will come for people with disabilities (Schriner, 2002).

**Culture**

Asian American/Pacific Islanders (AAPI) are the fastest growing minority group in the United States today, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, 1992 (Hampton, 2000). There has been a 50% increase in this group during the 1990’s. Douhitt’s article on the problems associated with providing services to persons with disabilities from minority groups, points out that members of the AAPI minority group have dual disabilities – first their individual disabilities and secondly, their membership in a cultural minority group
AAPI group members generally place high value on harmony between individuals and groups, and their cultures are often centered on nature. This is in sharp contrast to the Western cultures they find themselves in, which place high value on controlling nature in order to make it work for humans, and the emphasis on individual rights versus harmony within the group (Chung, 1989).

The Western-style world-view focuses on the individual, to the extent that the overriding belief is that the world is made for “me,” with the focus on immediate results in the pursuit of one goal at a time. In contrast, AAPI cultures focus on many activities at once, within a much less predictable timeframe – believing that everything has its own time (Chung, 1989).

Shirley’s culture, that of the Filipino Catholic, most of which have a strong belief in the power of their faith to heal. When one is sick, she/he will first try to “fight off” their illness by positive thinking and next try to find help from someone in their family. If these efforts are still unsuccessful, they may try prayer and then seek out a traditional healer in the community. As a last resort, western medicine will be consulted (Palafox, 1980). Shirley’s parents often mentioned family and prayer as ways of coping with the difficulties associated with Shirley’s development and education. The Catholic priest was not only a real support, as often mentioned in the interviews, but he is also now Shirley’s main employer.

When Filipinos mention family as support, or to be consulted in the event of illness, they are usually speaking about extended family members – aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents and trusted friends – who may be called on to help. Reciprocity is an implicit notion in these requests. In this context, reciprocity takes the form of an obligation. It is uncommon to see elderly Filipinos who have a chronic illness or a disability in an extended care facility. The family pulls together to provide care and the younger members are called on to reciprocate the care they received as children, or the care their family received from grandparents or other extended family members.

Douhitt discusses this family support and involvement, stating that this involvement can help the individual adjust to a disability, and that this family help and support can be major factors in maintaining goals achieved and gains made in rehabilitation (Douhitt, 1002). But sometimes the individual with a disability, though given exceptional care, may experience isolation and lack participation in the community. Thus the individual may not experience the benefits possible from education and interaction with peers.

The final point made by Douhitt is that professionals and others who plan to work with cultural groups different from their own, should make an effort to become more knowledgeable about other cultures. Sensitivity to cultural differences may impact relationships, and therefore cultural awareness is a necessity for those professionals providing care in the educational or rehabilitation settings.

Shirley was fortunate in that her family was motivated to educate themselves about the services available for their daughter, and to work with her teachers and counselors to
provide her with the optimal educational supports – home and school working together. She has been exposed to the best of both cultures, and has been able to, not only benefit, but also participate actively in her culture and religion and has become a contributing member of the community.

**Conclusion**

I used a narrative style and descriptive study design, and then completed a limited literature review and the relevant data were discussed as they related to the story. In the process of completing this review, it became clear that three main topics appeared repeatedly, in connection with vocational rehabilitation and education, and these themes were also clearly related to Shirley’s life history.

The three topics were education, women and culture. Education was discussed from the standpoint of statistics gathered about the factors associated with success with vocational rehabilitation. Shirley and her family fit all the criteria that “predict success,” except that the family is not a member of the dominant cultural group in the community.

Women are still at a disadvantage today and several authors have argued that being a woman with a disability has double disadvantages. In Shirley’s particular case, however, she did not seem to be hindered by her sex. As postulated in my discussion, this may be because her father was often her main teacher and advocate, and she was not indoctrinated with the idea that women are limited in their career and life pursuits.

The Filipino culture, as a part of the Asian American/Pacific Islander minority group, was briefly examined, in some of its general aspects, and compared with the dominant Western culture. Shirley’s specific situation was related to her Filipino cultures’ main ideas and traditions, as she and her support system described them. The Catholic religion was touched on briefly, as this has been a major influence in the spiritual lives of Shirley and her family, as well as the fact that it is the dominant religion of the Philippines, and a major contributing force in the Filipino culture.

The main factor that stood out for me on completion of this study was the realization that the natural supports that pre-exist for a client who is seeking vocational education or rehabilitation are the most important factors contributing to their success or failure at their goals. We, as educators, can offer knowledge and resources, as well as personal sensitivity and cultural understanding, but if parental, family, and spiritual supports are not available to the client, the chances of success are greatly diminished.

**References**


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