

Roommates and friends: A seminary does disability ministry

by [Amy Julia Becker](#) in the [February 20, 2013](#) issue



COURTESY WESTERN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

On a Sunday morning in the spring of 2005, Deb and Bob Sterken went as usual to church in Holland, Michigan. But this Sunday they arrived with a special mission: to talk to Matt Floding, the dean of students at Western Theological Seminary. The Sterkens' adult son Rob had Down syndrome, and they had been told that Dean Floding might be able to help Rob find appropriate housing.

The Sterkens had been running into the same barriers that millions of parents of adults with disabilities encounter. Their son wanted to live independently, and they believed he no longer required the constant oversight of his parents. Yet he needed a safe place with some support in order to navigate the tasks and challenges of daily living.

At first, Floding didn't know what Rob Sterken's situation could possibly have to do with Western Seminary. But Floding had been reading a book by Luther Snow called *The Power of Asset Mapping*. Floding connected the premise of Snow's book to the conversation he had with the Sterkens in the back of the church that Sunday.

"There are so many assets available to you to do ministry if you can just see them," said Floding, summarizing Snow's thesis. According to Snow, needs produce assets. Added Floding: "So I said to Deb and Bob, 'Let's put your need with ours and see

what happens.’”

Besides reading Luther Snow, Floding had been primed for this moment in other ways. He grew up with a family member who was deaf, and he had served as the legal guardian for Sally, a cognitively impaired 75-year-old woman who participated in his Sunday school class.

At the time, Western Seminary needed more housing for its students. Floding came up with an idea: if students from Western and adults with cognitive disabilities could live side by side, it would benefit the individuals involved, the seminary community and the larger Holland community. His assumption was that both groups had needs and both had assets and that their living together would offer mutual blessings.

Deb Sterken had been meeting with a few other mothers for about a year before what she called the “providential” conversation with Floding. One of those mothers, Patty Dalman, whose daughter Megan was 22 at the time, remembers going to Grand Rapids to meet with an attorney whose specialty was working out guardianship, wills and estate planning for people with special-needs kids. “We were telling him our ideas about finding an apartment. He was telling us the roadblocks.”

For adults with disabilities, and for those with intellectual or developmental disabilities (I/DD) in particular, supported independent living options are rare. Some states have waiting lists of up to 10,000 individuals looking for such housing. According to David Braddock, executive director of the Coleman Institute for Cognitive Disabilities, in the next ten years the demand for residential services for adults with I/DD will increase. The State of the States in Developmental Disabilities Report, which came out in 2010, estimates that 166,000 more such people will need housing in the next decade. The preferred model of housing is a setting that supports six or fewer individuals with I/DD, rather than large institutions or middle-sized group homes.

After joining the mothers for their regular meetings, Floding developed a plan to present to Western Seminary’s board of trustees. Adults with I/DD would live side by side with seminary students. The first idea was to renovate a house that had access to public transportation, proximity to campus and opportunities for employment, recreation and social activities.

Eventually, however, Floding went to the board with a plan to build a new apartment complex on Western’s campus. The building would hold six suites, and each suite

would include four bedrooms—one for a “friend resident” and three for students. The suites included two full bathrooms in addition to a kitchen and a common area. It would cost \$2.5 million to build, and it would be named Friendship House.

The board of trustees asked one question: “Is Friendship House in keeping with the seminary’s mission?”

In responding to that question, Floding noted that 18 percent of Americans live with some form of disability. “By building Friendship House,” he said, the seminary could produce ministers who would be “better equipped to minister to the whole family of God.”

In addition to the missional aspect of Friendship House, Floding explained that the house would provide revenue to the seminary through rental income. It would also attract students with a particular interest in ministry with people with disabilities.

As plans for the building and funding developed, Kathy VanderBroek took responsibility for creating an admissions process. Having no previous experience in this area, she investigated how other organizations managed the process. In addition to going through an interview and assessment process, each potential resident must submit community references and work references. About 30 people applied for a room, all from within a ten-mile radius of Holland.

Construction on Friendship House began in the summer of 2006. A large structure of deep red brick, the house is nestled into a corner lot adjacent to the seminary chapel and main academic building and across from other student dormitories. Inside, the walls are painted with bright colors and adorned with paintings by a local artist. Neighbors and members of the Holland community organized “showers” in order to supply the kitchens and demonstrate their support of this unusual endeavor.

In 2007, four friend residents, including Rob Sterken and Patty Dalman, moved in, along with 11 students from Western or nearby Hope College. One year later, two more friend residents and seven more roommates filled in the remaining suites.

Life together isn’t always easy. Jane Finn, who teaches special education at Hope College, gathered data about the Friendship House experience. She interviewed the residents and the parents of the friend residents and concluded that the residents needed a greater sense of community and clearer expectations about their role within the house. Most of the parents of friend residents reported some initial

tension because of miscommunications about expectations in using the shared living space.

One friend resident needed to learn not to eat her roommates' food. Rob Sterken reported that he needed help to change a lightbulb. Floding noted that a few problems arose related to "learning and growing that includes learning how to deal with sexuality." Another friend resident gave "unwanted attention" to a student attending Hope. Still another discovered pornography. Finn's report noted, however, that

all parties commented on how much participants had grown from the experience. Specifically, the roommates with cognitive impairments became more independent while living on their own. The seminary and Hope students, in turn, learned about slowing down and enjoying the simple pleasures of life, sharing life experiences, and how families and people with cognitive impairments live. Many seminary students reflected on how this experience will help them in their chosen field.

Although Friendship House had a residential director from the beginning, it became clear that the RD needed to provide more guidance for both the friend residents and the students than would be expected in the usual dorm. During Friendship House's second year, Floding offered seminary students an orientation to the house led by local special-education teachers, who helped define the role of roommates (they are supposed to be roommates, not parents or teachers) and offered advice on how to handle certain situations. The seminary became more intentional about building community through Bible studies, monthly house activities and an annual trip to Chicago.

Amber Taylor, who became residential director in 2010, said, "I wanted to go to Western because it supported people with intellectual disabilities. I chose Western so that I could live at the Friendship House."

Her presence has helped to overcome what Rob Matthews, a student who lived in Friendship House, identified as one of the biggest challenges: "trying to figure out how to connect the seminary and Friendship House in meaningful ways."

"I did all these events for seminary students every Thursday night and no one would come. I would get really discouraged," recalled Taylor. "I was pushing too much. Having conversations and making myself available have opened doors. Now I have

students wanting to get friends involved with chapel, and people are now extending invitations to the friends personally. A lot of seminary students will ask questions about people with special needs and disabilities or ask for book suggestions from me. People are utilizing this place and trying to be intentional about taking advantage of it as they go out into ministry.”

Despite the challenges, Friendship House has had a significant effect on the friend residents. Part of the school’s three-year study was to have the friend residents retake the instrument initially used to assess their independence. When they retook the test, all had outgrown it, Floding said. “It’s amazing how adjusted they have become to independent living. We had to find a new instrument to establish a new baseline.”

Rob Sterken said of life in Friendship House: “The best thing is there’s great people I trust.” Beth Kragt, whose daughter Amanda lives in the house, described how Amanda rides her scooter all over town and is known throughout the Holland community. “She has grown almost beyond Friendship House. I could see her moving into an apartment with another person with a disability and having a community living skills person come in a couple times a week and getting along well without constant supervision. I couldn’t have imagined it even five years ago.”

The benefits of Friendship House have gone both ways. The entire Western Seminary community has received the blessing of friend residents, whether through cookouts on the Friendship House patio, Rob Sterken’s willingness to serve communion in chapel or Amanda Kragt’s performance of liturgical dance. The student residents have experienced the most profound transformation, because they have had the opportunity to know peers with intellectual disabilities as friends.

Taylor described her relationship with Kragt, her suitemate, as a model friendship: “We don’t always get along. We have our differences. But we genuinely love each other and make each other better people by being friends. She’s honest and vulnerable within our friendship, so we’ve been able to become much closer. It is so hard to confront a friend who is driving you nuts, but with Amanda you have to be up front and honest. If I weren’t, she wouldn’t understand my being angry with her. She would want to know why. It is so easy for her to talk to me and for me to talk with her and be honest.”

Matthews said that at first he was not interested in Friendship House. “I was concerned that living with a developmentally disabled young adult was going to be a real challenge [to fit in alongside] a graduate degree program.” He eventually moved in because the house seemed like a comfortable and spacious place to live. But it was impossible to live in the house without building relationships.

He learned that what his roommate, Dan Mutschler, wanted most was the ability to live on his own, to not need his parents or even need roommates. “He just wants to make it on his own.” Matthews suspects now that he will miss Mutschler more than Mutschler will miss him. He is certain that the experience of living in Friendship House has permanently altered his approach to people with disabilities.

Matthews remembered the day when a woman who was touring the house came to the door. He introduced himself as Rob, and the visitor assumed that he was Rob Sterken, one of the friend residents. “When she found out my name was Rob, the lady bent over, got real close and said, ‘Oh, I’ve heard so much about you. It’s so great that you have a place like this to live.’” The woman talked to him as if he were a small child. Said Matthews: “I can never talk like that. Our friends deserve to be challenged and encouraged. They can do so much more than we allow them to. We don’t give them enough opportunities. We don’t challenge them enough.”

Floding told of another student’s personal and theological transformation through his time in Friendship House: “This student acknowledged he grew up in a moralistic and legalistic home. He told me that he realized through the unconditional acceptance of his friend roommate that he was formed to be judgmental and legalistic—and “that’s the kind of pastor I would have been. But I began to understand God in a whole new way.”

In 2009, after Floding realized the “win-win-win” nature of Friendship House, he created a packet of information and sent it to seminary presidents across the nation to see if they were interested in taking up the model. He got no response. When he called someone he knew at another seminary, the person said, “I’m not sure we can take the risk.” The person was thinking, Floding said, of group homes where abuse and other issues become a problem.

Author and ethicist Stanley Hauerwas comments that this kind of “innovative institutionalization” is crucial for the formation of seminarians. “One of the things we don’t do well in most seminaries today is formation. We educate but we don’t form.

And having people studying theology and having to learn to live with someone who may take an hour and half to eat is a very good thing.”

Floding remains enthusiastic about the project. He has created Friendship House Partners, a nonprofit organization whose mission is to “work alongside persons with intellectual disabilities and their families to secure safe, affordable community-oriented housing.” Western Seminary is in the process of creating a second Friendship House across the street from the current one. Friendship House Partners is working with Duke Divinity School to open a Friendship House there this year.

Friendship House offers a creative solution to a community’s need to provide housing for adults with I/DD. It provides training for pastors. Perhaps most important of all, it offers friendship. “It is hard to be anywhere in the house and be sad,” said Taylor. “It is such a warm and welcoming place. This house is a safe place for many. So much laughter goes on in this house.”