



A Conversation with Otto Lana

Dr. Julie Causton
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Advice for Paraprofessionals...

Please know your position is valued. Please treat your position as a profession ... you are not “just a...”. You are the thread that supports a day that can be seamless or completely unraveled. You serve the function of interdependence you are an integral component to success.

~ Otto Lana

Were you in inclusive settings?

Inclusion is a complicated ballet where all the principal dancers must be performing to the same music. I was mainstreamed in kindergarten with a lovely aide. We were dancing “The Nutcracker” and everyone else was dancing “Swan Lake”. The composer is the same but the performance is very different. I was enrolled in the classroom but I was not part of the class. This is more often the case than not.

~ Otto Lana

1) What would you like to tell us about your educational background?

If you are referring to school, I have done it all. First I was mainstreamed with an aide. Then I was enrolled in a class with all disabled children, we were the island of misfit toys. Then I spent two years on a school for autistic kids. Then I learned to type. The last five years have been spent in private schools with an academic focus and a dedicated communication partner for the last three years. I am proud to say I am nearly finished with my ninth grade classes. This may not seem impressive but I did this in just five years. I had no academic goals before I learned to type. People are always intrigued and want to know how I learned things without direct instruction, like spelling. I remind them the world is a classroom and lessons are around you all the time, you just have to observe and absorb.

~ Otto Lana

2) How have paraprofessionals been influential/helpful to you?

Helping me with my self confidence and words of encouragement are helpful. Maya Angelou said "people will never forget how you made them feel." This is what I think makes a good paraprofessional, it is not about what they do specifically it is about if you are made to feel worthy, valued, competent. I appreciate when they run interference, like making modifications on the fly so I can access academics and activities. Seeing the world through my eyes and helping me advocate for hand sanitizer in the bathroom because the water faucet is too hard to turn or paper towels because the hand dryer is too loud. Paying attention to supporting my communication without speaking for me or being buddy buddy with my peers.

~ Otto Lana

3) Can you share a little about typing to communicate? How does it work for those who have never experienced it?

It is just like any other form of communication where you can't speak and you use your big toe to hit tiny letters that are moving targets in front of your eyes and you make crazy looking movements with the rest of your body or wacky facial expressions or ridiculous sounds spill out of your mouth and if you are lucky enough to engage your audience, even an audience of one, you will witness the shock and awe on their face when they read your text. The moment just before the first tear drops from their lower lashes because they doubted you, but there in print is proof of your intellect. It's like that. I use the imagery of a big toe. I of course use my index finger but most people have the same motor control with their big toe as I have with my index finger.

~ Otto Lana

4) Your intelligence and gifts are so obvious, tell us your thoughts for students for whom it is not as clear. How can we do a better job getting to know and shine a light on each student's gifts and contributions?

Be patient. It's like the time lapse camera filming a flower blooming or the high speed camera filming a hummingbird's wings. Both are miracles that our human eyes cannot appreciate their beauty. We need technology to assist in discovering these miracles. AT and AAC are just tools. The correct tools must be implemented to witness the miracles.

If it walks like a duck and talks like a duck it might be a baby swan. If a person has only thought of a nonspeaking individual as one thing, like a person would call every waterfowl a duck because this is the only waterfowl they have ever had contact with, they will miss the beautiful swan typist.

~ Otto Lana

5) What advice to paraprofessionals to help them be their best with all types of students?

Leave your personal problems at the door because we sense everything. I guarantee your worst day is still probably easier than our best day. Remember everyday is a day to shine. Everyday is a fresh start so wash off yesterday's crappy failures and don't take it personal if we don't meet your expectations. Remember we live with these challenges everyday. We never get to clock out or take a vacation from ourselves.

~ Otto Lana

6) Think about the support you received when you were younger and the support you receive now. How has that changed over as you've gotten older? What do you wish all paraprofessionals knew when you were younger?

Now my support focuses on my ability and right to communicate. Before I typed my support was task and skill focused with an emphasis on functional activities of daily living and safety. I wish they knew I am intelligent. I wish they spoke to me in the same pitch and cadence as they spoke to others, not in a high pitched, slow paced, simplistic vocabulary way.

~ Otto Lana

7) We'd love to know more about your dreams and plans for the future.

The possibilities are limitless. I want to go to college because I love learning. I imagine I will have a career. If self-driving car technology improves I can share a beer with friends.

~ Otto Lana

**If you want to see
competence, you have to
look for it.**

Thank you!

We wish you the BEST on your journey to create inclusive schools for
ALL students!

Julie and Kristie (and Otto)