*April, 2020*

Everyone here at GEC hopes that this letter finds you and your family well, and safe from the terrible virus that has ravaged our world. We are in the midst of a situation we never expected to find ourselves in. The COVID-19 pandemic is likely to define our generation, the way other global catastrophes and upheavals have defined generations before ours. What will we be able to say about our generation? How did we respond in the face of adversity?

Anthropologist Margaret Meade once reflected on what she considered to be the first sign of civilization. She dismissed clay pots or rudimentary tools of evidence, but rather insisted that a broken femur bone that had healed was a true sign of civilization. It indicated that someone had attended to the one who was hurt, cared for him, and kept him safe. **“Helping someone else through difficulty is where civilization starts”** Meade said.

The plague we are currently facing, like any other crisis, will reveal the best in some people. At GEC we believe that we are at our best when we are serving others. The goal is simple; keep the hundreds of people with developmental disabilities in our care safe, healthy, engaged, and happy. Achieving that goal during this pandemic has been far from simple. Residential group homes have had to be locked down for weeks at a time, adults and children with developmental disabilities have to be reached and taught through virtual means, staff have had to put themselves into isolation to prevent spreading infection to their own families. We have done everything we could think of to keep the people in our care, and our staff, safe.

Even so there have been losses. Mary was a friendly, loving woman in her 50’s living in one of our residences. Non-verbal since birth, Mary always found a way to communicate with staff. For someone who was non-verbal, she was one of the best communicators I’ve ever known. Through gestures and facial expressions, she let you know when she didn’t like something, and she left no room for interpretation. When she liked something, her unbridled enthusiasm would explode, and like a bull in a china shop, she’d plough through any barrier to get you in one of her bear hugs. Man, did you live for those hugs, the ultimate sign of Mary’s approval. Mary fell ill, and had a staff member volunteer to be 1:1 at her bedside, but because of a pre-existing respiratory issue, Mary never had a chance. Within 48 hours she had succumbed. Her biological family and her family at GEC will miss her so very much.

James was another individual who lived in a different residence. James was very verbal (even when you secretly hoped he would be quiet for just a minute). Staunchly independent, he never missed a chance to extoll the workforce about his rights and made sure that he advocated for himself nicely. He even appointed someone from administration as his “lawyer”, in case he was ever disputed. James also had a mischievous streak, and with a twinkle of an eye and a light touch, would sometimes remind us that he didn’t evenly apply those rights to his friends. He was always up for a debate though, usually reasonable, and always loving. James was physically strong at 50, with no pre-existing conditions, and yet the virus took his life within 3 days of showing symptoms. He was a leader in his residence, an outspoken advocate, and a wonderfully unique person. We all miss him every day.

The Guild for Exceptional Children has been home to Mary and James and many others like them, for most of their lives. We have become part of their families, and they part of ours, along with the hundreds of people in our care and the dedicated staff who serve them. We have taken some extraordinary steps in order to keep our “family” safe:

* Our school, day habilitation, social/recreation, music, and art programs have been closed, due to the need to practice social distancing. Virtual learning has been established for our school and day habilitation programs, and has begun for social/recreation, music and art.
* Our residences have been placed on 7-day lockdown, during which staff agree to stay in place for one full week, to reduce the foot traffic of daily shift changes and lessen the chance of bringing the coronavirus into one of the homes.
* Non-essential staff (those without direct support responsibilities) have seen their hours reduced, and members of administration have taken voluntary pay reductions to finance staffing at the residences, and to reward staff for the sacrifice they are making.
* We set up a step-down isolation unit on Third Avenue, with 5 hospital-like units (private room and bathroom, hospital bed, staffing and nursing supervision), for individuals who test positive but are discharged from the hospital. This enables us to monitor a person until they are asymptomatic, reducing the chance that they will re-introduce the virus into their home.
* We set up a schedule where each home is industrially cleaned and disinfected, an expensive but important step in keeping the homes virus free.
* We set up living space for staff who have been exposed to COVID-19 by working with one of our individuals, who need a place to stay so as not to bring the virus home to their own families.
* We are on the constant hunt for PPE (personal protective equipment) like masks, gowns, etc.to help keep our staff safe. In some cases, we’ve had to pay a high price for these items, because of price gouging, but we have also had many friends who have donated needed items.

We have been doing all of this, knowing that our funding will likely be reduced for some services (due to an inability to congregate in groups). We are doing this because we know it is the right thing to do! I know that many of you have already donated what you can to the GEC and to COVID-19 Relief in particular, and do not want to ask you to put yourselves in any hardship. I am asking, that if you feel you can contribute, or know of anyone who might be able to contribute, that you act on our behalf, and on the behalf of the people with developmental disabilities in our care, and reach out. Share this letter; we have a compelling need, and this need is not likely to dissipate any time soon. Even after the threat of the coronavirus begins to decrease, things at GEC cannot be expected to “return to normal” for a while. We will want to remember those we lost, nurse back to health those who have been sick, restore our services…. rebuild. In that vein, I would ask you to consider the idea for a recurring contribution. You can set it up any way you want (weekly, monthly, annual…) whatever you may be comfortable with. We also have opportunities for “honorariums” where people can be honored or remembered permanently on our “Tree of Life”. By supporting the Guild for Exceptional Children in the months ahead, you will be helping us get through this crisis, and begin the journey as we try to “return to normal”.

I’d like to end this letter with a story about one of our DSP’s. A young man named Aaron who usually works in one of our Day Habilitation programs. When we were looking for staff to work in the step down unit, Aaron stepped up and did three 24-hour shifts in a unit filled with COVID positive individuals. Three of the four individuals there eventually recovered and were discharged back into their homes. One ended up relapsing and had to be hospitalized. Aaron came forward again and worked 5 days at his bedside, in a hospital filled with COVID positive patients. You can talk about courage and devotion…here it is! This is just one story of the countless I have experienced during this crisis. Staff who are dedicated beyond comprehension, who put their own health at risk to provide the care that our people need. They do this because social distancing is not possible with this type of hands on work. They do this because the people we serve need to be cared for, and kept safe. Surely, this is the **best of humanity;** the basis for our hope; the reason for our recovery; and if future generations want to know where civilization starts, **it starts here**.

May you be safe and have the opportunity often, to witness the best of humanity.

Sincerely,

Joseph L. Riley

Executive Director/CEO