



Introduction to the premiere of the Susan Daniels film, “**Susan: In Her Own Words**”

by Henry McCarthy

Thoughts on Susan’s Creatively Sharing Her Disability Experience and Radiating Her Zest for Life

Thank you so much for the invitation to participate in this exciting celebration of Susan’s legacy and for the privilege to share reminiscences of my long-time friendship with the fabulous woman we all loved and admired. Susan and I were approximately the same age and had almost identical educational backgrounds, yet she always appeared more advanced in her professional development and consciousness than I, so I certainly considered her a mentor as well as a colleague. We first met at a workshop she gave in the late 1970s when we were each beginning our professional careers. I was immediately charmed and impressed. I followed up (by letter, in those days) after the workshop and maintained contact. Eventually, I got her to expand the content of that workshop into a chapter (Daniels, 1985) for a book I edited on disability and employment issues. That same year, she recruited me from my job in New York at a rehabilitation research and training center to join the faculty at Louisiana State University Health Sciences Center (LSUHSC) in New Orleans. Coincidentally, the “Big Easy” had been a fascination of mine from two sources: plays by and folklore about one of my favorite authors, Tennessee Williams; and from my first trip there during my freshman year of college almost two decades before. Like most visitors, I was intoxicated with the allure of New Orleans, especially after a week working in rural areas of the South as part of a semester-break service trip organized by an activist philosophy professor during the height of the African-American civil rights struggles in 1967. We spent New Year’s eve and day in New Orleans because our trip leader, a Jesuit priest, got us free housing on the Loyola University campus.

I share all these anecdotes about Susan and me to highlight a few connections in our symbiotic relationship. For example, as you might now guess, Susan did not have to do much arm-twisting to get me to apply for and then accept the job in her Department in New Orleans. Indeed, I have been forever grateful for all the opportunities I had there, with Susan and the other faculty she had recruited, to grow professionally and pedagogically through our work together. From the days of my youth, I had had occupational fantasies of being a teacher in the “Goodbye, Mr. Chips” tradition. So I reveled in the intellectual stimulation and dynamic discourse of academia. However, it was my immersion in the creative and collegial working environment, and the enormously fun atmosphere that Susan fostered in our work meetings and after-hours get-togethers, that made me feel so at home in our expanding Department of Rehabilitation Counseling.

Both my wife and I grew up in rather large extended families with whom we remained close as adults. Suddenly, we had to adjust to living in New Orleans where our nearest relative was 1200 miles away. Susan and John took us under their wings, introduced us to their friends, and were the first babysitters we trusted with our newborn son, Julian. After working together for three



years, Susan left to take a job at the Rehabilitation Services Administration here in DC. For a long time after that, I felt sad and rudderless, for myself and for the Department she had founded 10 years before. I depressingly complained about our loss of Susan to all my confidantes. Periodically, for years thereafter, I'd get a call or email from Susan, encouraging me to consider a job prospect in DC that would bring us back to being work colleagues. I was delighted by her invitations but never pursued them, for two reasons. One was that my wife refused to leave New Orleans because our roots there had grown surprisingly fast in its soggy soil and sultry climate, but mostly because it is the only American city with enough music in the streets and piquant flavor in the air to remind her of her Haitian homeland. The other reason was that I decided, as long as I was employed there and had the energy in me, I wanted to sustain the spirit of Susan in our Department, to continue the focus on community service and community partnerships that she nurtured. Such community outreach was not a popular priority for her or me to have as staff in a health sciences center that was entrenched in the expert medical model and that was eager to enhance its reputation as Louisiana's flagship research university. Nevertheless, these were the hallmarks of Susan's leadership of our Department, and I have tried my best to keep them alive, albeit in my own comparatively plodding fashion.

A principal way that I kept Susan's persona imprinted on the Department and the rehabilitation counseling profession was to ask her to give me two hours of academic time on many of her family visits back to New Orleans. Given Susan's passion for teaching and motivating others, it did not take lots of lobbying to get her to give up an afternoon of her vacation to come back to the classroom. I'll mention a few examples of these return visits. During the period she was a member of Hillary Clinton's healthcare reform task force in 1993, I arranged for her to give a lecture outlining the negotiations and proposals generated by that process. Another year, I conducted a lengthy interview with her as part of my oral history study of the disability rights movement and its leaders' assessments of its impact and its future. Occasionally, still, I get an enquiring email from a graduate student somewhere in the country who has an assignment to complete that is based on the article I wrote (McCarthy, 2003) from that study featuring Susan and several other advocates. Her last guest lecture at LSUHSC was given in October of 2010; she delineated different paradigms of disability, including the "eco/technology" model that Susan promoted professionally and exemplified personally. My favorite among the talks she gave for us was given on January 18, 2001 for our Department and her local "fan club" whom I regularly invited to join us whenever Susan was on the agenda. I wanted the students and new faculty to know our Department's founder; to see Susan's radiance; to hear her recount her journey as a polio survivor, outstanding student, progressive professional, policy enthusiast, disability rights activist, and cracker-jack public speaker. I wanted them to observe the amazing ways she manipulated her body, repeatedly assaulted as it was by disease, but triumphant to the end; and to learn how she negotiated inaccessible environments and used everyday tools to live a life bursting out of the confines of societal convention and medical prediction imposed on her. She arrived the day of that talk; we had a quick lunch and rushed to the lecture hall. This time, I had the prudence to hire a person to video the lecture, so I would not have to run as usual from podium to tripod, doing a one-man production of a one-woman show. The archive of that talk is what we will all see tonight. Thus, it was not professionally directed and filmed—I have no artistic or technical media skills. I'm just a teacher, trying to expand the knowledge and



imagination of future rehabilitation practitioners. However, when Susan Daniels is the star of your show, you have a jewel in your hands. Her enviable combination of sharp thinking and entertaining presentation style is powerful in delivering thought-provoking and hopeful messages about disability philosophy, policy, and experience. For the many of us close to Susan, the film reinforces our own cherished memories. For those who did not know her personally but will become acquainted with her through the film, I trust that the exposure to Susan's enterprising and endearing way of being in the world will leave not only a vivid impression of a remarkable individual but also awareness-raising images of disability as resilient wellness in action and an emblem of our common humanity.

I'll end my remarks by giving credit where it is definitely due. The uncut video is about 90 minutes long. My younger son, Germain, who really got to know Susan when we stayed in her living room for a few nights during the first Obama inauguration, created the background music and edited out all the visual and auditory distractions that befall a video done without technicians alongside. I donated the resulting rough-cut version to be sold and distributed for the benefit of Susan's mentorship fund. A group of Susan's friends took the rough-cut gem and polished it with their contributions of training expertise and professional editing. The result displays Susan's wisdom and sunshine in a streamlined version lasting a little longer than half an hour. I thank this group consisting of Jeanne Argoff, Barbara Butz, Derek Shields, Steve Allen, and Rayna Aylward for their substantial investment of time, effort, and funding sources to make the final film so crisp and engaging.

Thank you for your kind attention to my reminiscences of our beloved friend and mentor. Now let's enjoy the premiere of "**Susan: In Her Own Words**".