

## The Regional Center of Orange County and me

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I first became aware of the Regional Center of Orange County (RCOC) in 1993. My youngest son was referred for Early Start services and received speech and language services from Newport Speech and Language until he turned three. I'm so grateful for that opportunity, it really helped. Two years later, my older son was diagnosed with autism and became a consumer of regional center. We haven't received a lot of services for him over the years, but the support provided has been invaluable. In 2003, I responded to an ad for a psychologist position at RCOC. I'd been either self-employed or working on a straight commission since shortly after receiving my psychologist license eight years earlier and was ready for a steady paycheck, vacation pay, and a good retirement package. As well, I'd been cultivating my specialty in autism since my son's diagnosis and welcomed an environment that would stimulate my professional growth in this area.

Much of my job at RCOC involves reviewing documentation for eligibility or doing face-to-face eligibility / diagnostic assessments. Shortly after I came on board with the agency, California state law changed regarding eligibility for services. Previously, one needed only a diagnosis and evidence of substantial disability in one out of seven specific areas listed in the Lanterman act. As of August 2003, applicants for services needed to be disabled in a minimum of three areas. My job got more complicated. The reason for the change is not real clear, though the new state law was now more in line with federal law. It is believed by some that the target population of developmentally disabled was in need of further definition so as to include only the most severely disabled and by doing this the state would save money. I don't know if this is the case or not.

Meanwhile, the autism epidemic was going full steam. Along with this, and caught up with it was higher functioning persons were now being considered for the diagnosis whereas previously many went overlooked or misdiagnosed. (This was the case with my son, having initially been diagnosed with severe ADHD.) Research marched on as well and so did the introduction of new and promising interventions. One finding, which has been twisted out of shape to some extent, was for the need of early intervention. It was twisted out of shape in the way it was understood by many parents who would then have a sense of panic concerning the urgency for their child's services. The myth that has emerged is that unless the autistic symptoms are addressed by intensive services before the age of five, the hope of recovery is lost. In reality, early intervention is important, however there is no

reason to panic, nor is there any reason to believe that the window of opportunity ever closes. As long as learning can take place, intervention can be effective.

Anyway, there is also this interesting social psychological phenomena at play which would attribute everything bad to one's opponent and minimize anything good that can come from them. At the same time, the opposite dynamic is at work with one's self and the group one identifies with. We find this between rival schools as well as warring nations. (Rent "Das Boot" this weekend and check in with your feelings about WWII.) We also find this between advocacy or consumer groups and government agencies or gatekeeper agencies like RCOC. The California legislature seems to have anticipated this type of phenomena when they established the regional center system as a group of non-profit agencies instead of extending their responsibility to an enlarged branch of state government.

Anyway, this puts me in an interesting position. I've been an active part of the autism community in Orange County for a lot longer than I've been employed by RCOC. RCOC has been demonized by many and the ripple effect has created this "us" against "them" mentality, catching me in the middle. I imagine Kobe Bryant may feel similarly when the Lakers go back east to play Philadelphia. He's from there - a hometown boy, but also the star of the opposing team. What does a Philadelphia fan do, cheer or boo?

It doesn't explain everything; however I believe these dynamics are very much at play within the autism community in Orange County. I believe them to have been epitomized in the 2007 Orange County Register columns on the Regional Center by Yvette Cabrera. I was somewhat familiar with three of the cases Ms Cabrera wrote about, and very familiar with one of them. The October 2<sup>nd</sup> column titled, "Mother fights for autism services" featured yours truly. Needless to say, I would tell that particular story much differently. Yvette's source for the comments concerning how I handled myself in this case fell right into this we are all "good" you are all "bad" mentality. The rub is that I am as much part of the "we" as I am the "you". Following its publication, I found myself the recipient of tremendous support from those who know me within the autism community as well as those "inside" the regional center. My character was assaulted, and those who knew me knew that what I was accused of was inconsistent with who I am personally and professionally. Unfortunately, there are a number in the autism community who aren't as familiar with me, and would tend to believe what they read in the paper.

Interestingly, I find the arrows coming from other directions as well. In order to avoid a conflict of interest, I don't see RCOC consumers or potential consumers in my practice with Meier Clinics. I have no problem however, being

involved in cases outside Orange County that may involve other regional centers. I am in a unique position for people living in surrounding communities as I know much more about the system than most on the "outside". In a recent fair hearing involving another regional center, the appellant had used my assessment services. The regional center in this case, apparently felt that I had unfairly used "inside" information - or something like that, and moved that my test report be excluded as evidence because I worked for another regional center agency. The judge disagreed, and kept the report in.

My approach is this: I don't take sides. I analyze the data and apply the eligibility criteria to it. I don't try to force the data or creatively reframe it. If I don't believe someone is eligible, I won't try to make it seem that they are. If I believe someone should be eligible for their regional center, I will advocate for them as persuasively as I can. Those who've used my services can attest to this.

I do the same with my work within RCOC. I'm not encouraged by anyone to keep people out of the regional center. I don't receive a "bonus" for money saved by saying "no" to applicants. I won't be pressured by anyone, inside or out. My clinical opinion is my own and I alone am responsible for it. There have been numerous times at RCOC that I have changed my "no" to a "yes" based on receiving additional information. I'm not embarrassed to do that. It is my true desire that everyone who meets the eligibility criteria should be made a consumer of RCOC. I believe this is an honest approach to take. It doesn't fit neatly into an "us" versus "them" mentality. Consequently, there are people out there that don't necessarily know what to do with me. For those who may need it, I hope this explanation helps.