

Introducing the Star Raft

Gather your circle. Set a good direction. Take the helm!



The Star Raft is a field-tested method for building and sustaining individual support networks that are person-centered, family-friendly, and energized by committed relationships from the larger community.

The method includes a complete set of step-by-step patterns for identifying people who can help, mapping their connections, capacities, and the community spaces and workplaces in which they have standing, inviting them to form a circle and mobilizing their personal networks in collaboration with and in support of the focus person and the family.

Star Raft circles are based in relationship and clearly focused on action:

- They **invite and clarify** individual and family objectives and create a strong sense of direction
- They **identify and mobilize** the focus person's skills, capacities and interests
- They **engage and mobilize** community partners who have standing and influence in workplaces, learning spaces and community associations where the person's presence and contributions will be welcomed and valued
- They systematically '**follow the threads**' of the person's interests in the direction of companionship, connection and contribution
- They **sustain commitments** and involvement over time by continually working on a flow of new membership into the group

All of these features are important because:

Families need lifelong trustworthy sources for continuity of care and creative problem-solving alongside their sons and daughters. They need to know that when they are no longer able or available, there will be a rich circle of support surrounding their family member.

People who live with significant challenges need trustworthy friends, acceptance, meaningful employment and valued roles in community places. The Star Raft systematically engages community partners who can open doors to the associations, workplaces and learning spaces in which they themselves have standing and influence.

Introducing the Star Raft

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Community partners need an understandable model for making meaningful differences in one person's life. The Star Raft is a balanced and self-renewing circle, so individual partners know that the commitments they make are manageable.

Why do we call it a Star Raft and why did we adopt a sailing metaphor?

We searched for a long time to find a metaphor that would make it easy for people to learn, visualize and practice the invitations, actions and agreements involved in developing and sustaining a citizen-based circle of support. Several years ago, we discovered that recreational sailors tie up in circular 'star rafts' when they want to 'anchor in community', and we saw that the process closely mirrored what we want to be doing when forming a circle.

We realized that this ...



Is like this ...



Sailing star rafts are based on a long-standing nautical tradition of hospitality and keeping each other safe on the water. Everyone shares what they carry on board. Experienced sailors help new sailors learn the ropes. Friends plan excursions and make agreements on how they will manage hazards up ahead. And the pattern can be easily 'paid forward' — everyone who has ever been in a sailing star raft knows how to start and build the next one.

The nautical metaphor is useful in another way — the well-known roles and responsibilities involved in sailing are helpful when we're thinking about building and maintaining great circles. On any vessel, large or small, the skipper, the navigator, the map-maker and other crew members have specific roles to play in conducting safe, happy and successful journeys. We explored other metaphors,

Introducing the Star Raft

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including 'teams' and 'clubs', but somehow, they aren't quite as instructive. It's a bit harder to figure out what the third baseman's job is in a circle meeting.

Since its introduction, the Star Raft has evolved into a complete set of circle-building tools and practices. It's a bit like a skipper's tool kit - a good navigational chart, a community GPS, essential safety practices and a set of concrete strategies that can help individuals and families mobilize committed relationships, access the 'sweet places' in community, and get safely through turbulent times.

Navigating Transitions



Successful transitions, including transitions from school to meaningful employment, from isolation to a life that is rich in relationships, from client-hood towards autonomy, interdependence and valued social roles, always occur in company. This is not a 'disability' topic — it's true for everyone, including those of us who may be experiencing our own challenging transitions, including those related to aging.

When we think about it, we notice that almost all successful personal, family and community enterprises involve collaborations with committed and trustworthy partners. We often think that our own partnerships simply 'happened' — that they emerged spontaneously over the course of time. But when we reflect on our most important relationships — the ones that really made a difference in our lives — we may realize that many of them involved on-purpose introductions and commitments on the part of family, friends, mentors and community partners.

The Star Raft is a pattern for inviting, cultivating and strengthening those committed relationships, moving forward together, and operating in a way that keeps renewing itself over time.

Making Big Progress, One Small Step at a Time

Great enterprises often start with a single conversation that wakes up a listener's imagination, paints a picture of a future that we want to move into, and generates meaningful action. Enterprises that grow, keep finding new sources of energy and last a lifetime, seem to have found a 'recipe' for success. Each Star Raft begins

Introducing the Star Raft

Gather your circle. Set a good direction. Take the helm!

with a single conversation and is built one person, one invitation at a time. Each invitation sets the stage for a set of deeper conversations that include identifying and mobilizing the focus person's gifts and interests, finding people we already know who share those interests, and engaging allies who have standing in community spaces where those interests are most closely reflected.

The Navigation Chart



The Star Raft navigation chart reminds us that parents, friends and individuals who live with unique challenges and capacities are always standing between two maps — standing between the ‘boundary with the service system’ and the ‘shoreline of community’. It turns out that these two environments have very different rules and methods of operating, and they offer vastly different opportunities.

The service system contains some important — even essential — competencies, but there is always competition for scarce resources. On the other hand, the shoreline of community is inherently more abundant. Think about how many personal connections you have and how many personal connections each of your friends has. Until now, when someone needs support, the community at large hasn't had a very strong model for mobilizing this rich set of connections, and we've seen that when the unspoken assumption is that somehow ‘the service system will take care of things’, the community's contribution goes missing in action.

The challenge and opportunity faced by people who live with disabilities, their families and their friends is finding and keeping a balance, becoming as skilled at navigating the shoreline of community as they are at negotiating the boundary with the service system. The Star Raft navigation chart reminds us that we always have options and it gives concrete clues as to what some fruitful next steps might be.

Setting a Good Direction



The ‘direction’ of each Star Raft is as unique as the person who offers the reason for forming it, but every Star Raft is designed to lead towards a life that is rich in relationships, where the person at the center occupies valued social roles and has many opportunities to make meaningful contributions.

Introducing the Star Raft

Gather your circle. Set a good direction. Take the helm!

This isn't just about some distant future; it's about the *meantime* as well. One parent reminded us that the Star Raft helps us to begin living the future we hope for, starting now. The next person who joins the circle is one more ally who is actively offering acceptance, understanding, connection, and new opportunities.

Some Star Rafts focus on customized employment. Others help people develop and operate small businesses. Some evolve into Microboards that help individuals and families manage their direct support services, and all of them can help the person at the center navigate the challenges involved in starting a new job, making the transition to a new home, or finding a valued place in civic, cultural, religious, activity-based or other community associations.

Star Raft strategies can be seamlessly incorporated into existing person-centered planning and direct support service activities, making each conversation an opportunity to consciously strengthen and leverage natural supports in people's lives. The pattern is working in disability, mental health and community services, and it has strong potential in areas such as child protection, community justice and supports for those of us who are aging.

People are saying:

"I've been connected to the autism society for fourteen years, and I've never heard anything even remotely like this. This is the first thing parents should hear. "

- a parent of a son with autism

"This reawakens my hope!"

- a single parent of three children with complex care needs

"I felt so isolated until I realized how many people I can reach who care about us. "

- a parent of a daughter with multiple disabilities

"J. is more motivated than he's been in years. He's taking organized, concrete actions toward his goals in a way that hasn't happened before. The Star Raft set the stage for everyone to focus on something positive. Friends and family members are now partnering with J. to help him achieve his goals."

- a direct support supervisor in a community mental health program

Introducing the Star Raft

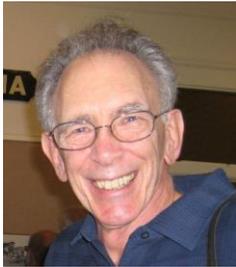
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A little more about us:

The Star Raft Project is a registered 501(c)3 charitable nonprofit with a singular mission: to bring the tools and supports needed for building individual circles directly into the hands of people who live with unique challenges, their families, friends and community partners — for free, forever.

The Project is currently supporting several active field projects. We are training facilitators, mentors and teachers, developing streaming video and print materials, and undertaking participatory research on the model. The project frequently hosts web-based trainings and 'kitchen-table' video conversations with families, self-advocates, providers, church congregations, and community partners.

David and Faye Wetherow are the people who invented the Star Raft and who created the first Microboards — small incorporated circles that facilitate direct funding — a model that now serves over 1,500 people worldwide. They developed the first inclusive housing cooperative and the first person- and family-directed service cooperative in North America. They are parents, advocates and seasoned trainers in qualitative program evaluation and person-centered planning. They shared their lives with a beloved adopted daughter who lived with significant health, mobility and communication challenges until her passing in 2004.



David has been involved in human service design and development for over thirty years, working in the fields of mental health, substance abuse recovery, child welfare, and disability services. He now serves as the Executive Director of the US nonprofit Star Raft Project, and he joins us from Vancouver Island, British Columbia.