CHATS WITH
PEOPLE WHO USE SRV

asrva
AUSTRALIAN SOCIAL ROLE VALORISATION ASSOCIATION

JOHN ARMSTRONG

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From 1992 John Armstrong was a senior SRV trainer and self-employed human service consultant. He continues to live with his wife Lynne (having just celebrated 52 years of marriage), is pretty much retired, is a backyard beekeeper, a Citizen Advocacy board member and lives in Sunbury Victoria.

GREG: John, how did you became interested in SRV?

JOHN: My parents became deaf after birth. My Mum was also quite ill throughout her relatively short life, with frequent visits to hospital, sometimes having to endure painful and even experimental treatments. I was drawn early to her struggles being, as might be described today, a 'child carer'. In addition to her physical struggles, it was apparent to me that her standing in the eyes of others was also deeply affected. At that time of course, I lacked the language and the concepts to describe why that was so.

After completing training as teachers for Aboriginal schools, Lynne and I travelled to our posting in Central Australia and later, Alice Springs. We stayed a total of eight years, including an extra year of training for me in Melbourne, as a Teacher of the Deaf. The existential threats to the lives of our students became most apparent, as one culture collided with another, seemingly leaving both out of reach. Most of the students Lynne and I taught have already passed away.

After a short stint at a school for children with autism in1982, I joined one of the newly formed regional teams of the state department responsible for disability services in Victoria (MRD), located in Melbourne. My then boss attended the first PASSING workshop held in the world, conducted in Adelaide and led by Wolf Wolfensberger himself. My boss was both in awe of the material and infuriated with Wolf, as he had apparently (so I am told) denounced all the team's results due to their inaccurate conclusions. I don't think any of the Team Leaders had led a team before or had prior exposure to the tool, or even its predecessor, PASS 3.

Soon afterwards, a newly appointed Assistant Director, Dr Mike Steer, who had participated in events run by Wolf and the TI, arranged with my boss and Martin Elks, to conduct a PASS 3 workshop. I was fortunate enough to attend.

> ***To say that a PASS 3 workshop was a complete revelation would be an understatement. It both defined what I had seen but couldn't explain and also what could be done about it. From that time forward, I couldn't get enough.***

I was very fortunate to be provided every opportunity to expand my experience and knowledge, including having a very understanding wife, mostly! By the late 80s I was the state training consultant for SRV which afforded me a full-time role teaching

SRV. It was a very exciting time. The first closure of institutions, including St Nicholas Hospital and the establishment of the first group homes, was occurring. In one of those years prior to 1987, I conducted ten PASSING events which, looking back, was just a bit insane! In the days before Michael Kendrick arrived in1987, we taught a 2-day theory followed immediately by a 3-day single site PASSING practicum. Michael brought us the 3-day, 7-theme SRV workshop including scripts. We had only had Overhead acetates up til then. He also brought the 2 site PASSING event. Many foundational SRV leaders though came through that old 5-day event!

GREG: Who has influenced you the most in understanding SRV?

JOHN: I've been fortunate to know and work with many great people across the years both locally and internationally, yet often it's the first exposure that leaves the deepest impression (I think there is an overhead about that!) and that came from seeing Mike Steer teach. He was very charismatic, LOL funny, and extremely engaging. Having gained the audience trust he was able to go on to gently confront them at a most significant level. His style had a substantial impact on how I began to teach SRV. I think many of us are particularly inspired by our first venerated teacher.

GREG: What do you really like about SRV?

JOHN:

SRV has a logic, sophistication (it's not a trivial concept), and a coherency that I find personally very appealing.

I am attracted to its layered complexity. Importantly, in being empirically descriptive, it requires the practitioner to derive their own values/reasons for using it. In other words, SRV can stimulate a greater clarity in the formation of our personal values, though the framework itself (as its author claims) is values neutral. This is a significant contrast to the many pseudo-values or the widely (and wildly) available narratives that currently abound.

GREG: What challenges you the most in using SRV?

JOHN: To keep going. Is the world getting better? SRV makes one realise that our basis of using SRV can't be dependent on an expectation that things will actually get better. Yet applying SRV is still the right thing to do as an act that is valid in its own right. Sure, we want things to get better, but what if it doesn't? Therefore, what will keep us going? (See question on next page).

GREG: In what ways does SRV impact your general lifestyle, how you live your life?

JOHN: It certainly does. We have several grandchildren at risk of being devalued. The family is guided by SRV, especially bolstering what Wolf referred to as 'extra-structural arrangements' outside of the service system. These include in music, sports, church and extended family and in being just a little cynical as to the frequent claims of the human service system.

Secondly, I'm on the Committee (again) of Citizen Advocacy Sunbury & Districts involved in guiding the coordinators in their work to accurately understand the situation of protégés, both new and existing, and the actions and roles advocates might pursue.

Additionally, I have a strong involvement with the Australian Citizen Advocacy Study Group which brings much practical discussion of SRV together with good CA practice with a great bunch of people.

Thirdly, our belief community, who strive to live by their beliefs and values, benefit from seeing how those values might be translated into practical action based on SRV, especially as communities struggle as we all grow older.

GREG: Looking back at how you use SRV, what would you like to do differently or to improve or learn more about?

JOHN: Some of the best learning opportunities for aspiring SRV & PASSING graduates was to be part of an official evaluation. It was common to receive requests from one or two agencies a year. Apart from the in-depth nature of the evaluation, verbal feedback and written report, it afforded team members a rich and impactful experience.

> ***With quality evaluation being largely supplanted by service system compliance, and agencies claiming quality without the need for evidence, official PASSING evaluations are now very rare. I don't think we saw that coming.***

This is a lost opportunity for showcasing the utility of PASSING as well as a lost learning opportunity to our PASSING graduates and team leaders. Might there by SRV leaders out there able to open doors to official evaluations?

GREG: What has sustained you?

JOHN: Wolf left us with a concept that reflects a complex reality. I have been partly sustained by the exploration of that complexity, which is why I found the 10-theme SRV workshop, the Citizen Advocacy Model, the Moral Coherency, and Sanctity of Life events so appealing. As teachers, he encouraged our effort towards developing people capable of putting their learning into practice, providing guidance to others. He believed that sustained change could not occur without it.

SRV has the appeal of a coherent and depthful framework. Furthermore, it has always been about the people with a devalued status, family members and practitioners who are driven by their calling to strive to achieve the good things of life. Being asked to be involved in the development of our new and exciting SRV teachers was one such example. It has seemed my calling was to nourish them as best I could, which has been an absolute privilege.

The question of what sustains me must include (in my case) the involvement of Lynne. She endured my long absences while I conducted events, some of which were abroad. Lynne also attended events, even assisting in several official evaluations. But clearly, it's an enormous advantage to have a partner who is supportive, for anyone wanting to embrace any opportunity for growth and learning. I have been very fortunate to have that.

Around 25 people also took part in our in-home SRVx10 study groups, including one who is a member of the ASRVA board. They experienced Lynne's fine cooking, which we realised might have been the real reason they signed up for these events in the first place!

GREG: What do you recommend that someone new to SRV, eg, just completed a theory event, do to start off well in using SRV?

JOHN: Take your time. Spend time to read and study ensuring any actions taken are well grounded.

Implementation isn't as linear as the sequence of ideas presented in an SRV event

There are likely many decisions and mid-course corrections that will be needed, little of which the theory event prepares you for. And there is often the endeavour to mitigate the non-programmatic issues! As many have already said, do PASSING, then your theory event will really make sense.

GREG: Thanks very much John, some intriguing comments there.

JOHN: Thank you, Greg, for asking me to share my answers to such interesting questions.