



NeighborWorks America NTI Reflections
By Richard Rueda, 2018

My name is Richard Rueda, and I recently participated as a Disability Ambassador with the World Institute on Disability (WID), attending the NeighborWorks Kansas City 2018 Training Institute. I have spent the past two-decades working in the field of Vocational Counseling and Nonprofit Leadership work, specifically within the blind and disability community. My passion is working with blind and disabled, transition-age young adults and working to guide them toward economic advantages through seeking higher education, sustainable competitive employment and all around self-sufficiency. In 2016, my career led me to Society for the Blind, locally in Sacramento, where I have worked in developing CareersPLUS, a career exploration program providing guidance and resources for the community.

I am honored to have been accepted to attend and participate in the NeighborWorks Kansas City Training Institute. In the six-days spent in Kansas City with other WID Ambassadors, staff and nearly 2,000 conference attendees from across the United States, opportunities were afforded to attend daylong sessions on affordable housing seminars and counseling sessions toward renting and home ownership. I spent the final two-days participating in the nonprofit leadership track seminar on “From Charity to Change,” which focused on advocacy and the techniques and tools needed to be an effective community leader.

As one of few conference attendees with a visible disability, I was pleased to have experienced more positive than not accommodations that made my participation flawless and provided equal access to course materials and electronic resources. Coupled with that, I did employ personal technology including the SeeingAI iPhone app, which allowed me to scan up-close signage on doors, walls and paper to immediately read back text of room numbers, conference bulletins on easels and class handouts. Additionally, I employed Aira, a real-time human narrated visual interpreter service that I use in conjunction with my phone and Google Glasses to aid in identifying buildings, natural and man-made environmental obstacles throughout the entire conference. The week-long sessions were spread out among various hotels and the Kansas City Conference Center in the downtown area. Using the above mentioned tools along with Odif, my seeing eye dog, I managed a robust schedule, getting from one meeting location to the next, including meet ups with conference attendees outside of class and the mid-week Chase bank reception.

A majority of the week’s courses focused on affordable housing and community development. As it turns out, having disability representation at the conference helps keep this topic at the forefront and a topic of mainstream discussion. Where disability may be referenced as a passing thought or given a quick snapshot comment from instructors, Ambassadors, such as myself, can interject thoughtful perspective on disability as it pertains to a growing number of the population, as humans live longer than ever before. I did notice from two course instructors throughout the week that they began to change the narrative from “handicapped” and “special needs” to “people/persons with disabilities.”

Furthermore, I do believe that there is additional work that the conference organizers and WID can do to insert disability both in terms of conference accommodations and into the mainstream

narrative DNA of NeighborWorks. WID and other well-known disability leaders may consider approaching organizers to propose hosting a one, two or three-day course on disability as it pertains to financial literacy, nonprofit leadership and naturally affordable housing and community development. Whereas many class handouts were provided in advance on thumb drive, having access to the course evaluation electronically in real-time would be of great equitable value, as well.

In closing, I believe that this was an outstanding conference both for personal and professional development. Attending to network, gain perspective from other thought leaders and developers and to continue to challenge myself to learn and grow will enable me to remain an invaluable asset to my employer, as well as a peer advocate to blind and disabled youth and aging adults.

WID and JPMorgan Chase should be proud of the end roads both are progressively contributing to the importance of conferences and to society as a whole. While there will always be necessary tweaks to make one's conference experience a superior one, there is a lot to be proud of and thankful for. There are countless persons with disabilities, old and young, who are forever indebted to this selfless effort.

And so with that, thank you JP Morgan Chase, NeighborWorks, the good friendly people of Kansas City and naturally WID's leadership team and their tireless staff on the ground who made the experience all that more amazing.

Richard Rueda is a program coordinator for the CareersPLUS Employment Program at Society for the Blind in Sacramento, CA, which assists blind, deaf blind and low vision people in career exploration and research. He also assists individuals in seeking housing and other community and social service needs. He has worked in the disability community both in government and in the not-for-profit sector with over twenty years of direct service delivery.



Richard as a Disability Ambassador