

CHAPTER 2

From “Old Cant” to “Can Do”

*I hate a song that makes you think that you are not any good.
I hate a song that makes you think that you are just born to lose.
I am out to fight those songs to my very last breath of air. I am out
to sing songs that make you take pride in yourself and in your work.*

—WOODY GUTHRIE

The 1960s were not only a time of stereotypical labeling and institution-ization, but also a time of “cannot.” We struggled against misconceptions of what individuals with disabilities could and could not do. During my short stint in the Job Corps, a corpsman in my classroom gave this pervasive negative attitude a name I’ve never forgotten: “Old Cant.”

Old Cant never dies, but it was really vigorous back then. It showed up under a number of guises but with the same old rant: People with intellectual disabilities *can’t* do this or *can’t* do that.

And “can’t” often meant “shouldn’t.” I remember the early days when young adults with disabilities attending school or day care programs would innocently walk across the street holding hands, and would be teased for doing so. And the topic of sex was never thought to be appropriate for discussion – quite a change from today.

I knocked heads with Old Cant just about daily in those years. It was alive and well in the DDA, the aforementioned basic funding system for Maryland residents with developmental disabilities. In the 1960s and 1970s, DDA simply would not allow any of its funds to be used for self-generating new income. The voice of Old Cant spoke loud and clear:

- *“Earl, you can’t do that. The regulations do not allow you to use the labor of staff and consumers to earn any self-generated income, even if the money goes back into program enrichment and wages for the participants.”*
- *“Earl, you can’t get the Charles County government to approve a special exemption for a Melwood satellite program. Melwood is based in Prince George’s County, and Charles County doesn’t want organizations from other counties. They just rejected an application for a drug treatment program that came from outside the county.”*

Melwood: A Story of Empowerment

Melwood provides solid opportunities to adults with developmental disabilities. Admirers in the not-for-profit world had long urged CEO Emeritus Earl Copus to share the agency’s amazing story. From a grass-roots effort based in an Army surplus tent, Melwood grew into a world-renowned model for horticultural therapy and social entrepreneurship.

As Earl’s coauthor and editor, Marian Calabro made it her top priority to preserve Earl’s voice, which is Southern, gentlemanly, and colorful. When he used the phrase “Old Cant” as a personification of negative attitudes, her ears perked up. The phrase launched a chapter about the evolution from “Old Cant to Can Do.”

Readers often comment that “the book sounds just like Earl” — the highest praise we could have hoped for.



CORPORATE
HISTORY.net

What is written is remembered.

201-288-2036

www.corporatehistory.net

info@corporatehistory.net