

GEORGIA MICROBOARDS ASSOCIATION, INC.

- Putting People Behind People Who Need People -

FEATURE ARTICLE BETTY THOMPSON

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BETTY THOMPSON'S CIRCLE OF FRIENDS

By Maria Pinkelton

"I have always been amazed at Betty as a person....can't is not a part of her life."

These are the words of Roger Sundy, Convener of Betty's Gathering Mission Group* and long time member of Oakhurst Baptist Church in Georgia. At this small church just outside of Atlanta, 66 year-old Betty Thompson has blazed a path for others - a path on which only the thought of what is possible is all that is considered.

Betty was born in Carrollton, Georgia in May of 1947 to Raymond and Vesta Thompson. Less than one year after her birth, she contracted a case of encephalitis and an accompanying high fever. The fever eventually broke, but the damage to sections of her brain that controlled muscle movement resulted in a diagnosis of Cerebral Palsy. Betty's parents resolved to take advantage of every opportunity that existed. Her parents and siblings ingrained self-confidence and determination in her at a young age. In the family, Betty was seen as a daughter and a sister, not as a person with a disability.

Years later, her tenacious spirit was seen when she brought together members of her mission group, family, and friends to assist in the creation of her PATH this past February. A PATH is a process that enables people to choose their pathways to success and leads them to becoming valued members of their community. Longtime friend Patty Hutton states that it is hard for many people to ask for help in achieving their goals, but such is not the case for Betty. "She has a life she wants to live and she needs some help with it," Patty explained. In the gathering, Betty's circle covered a long list of hopes, goals and possibilities. Because the attendees had known Betty for so long and because she naturally excelled in the leadership role, organizing priorities was simple. Professional, creative, housing, and travel goals were detailed, scheduled, and staffed by members of the group. Going through the process helped Betty to realistically visualize her future and aided in her being able to examine the feasibility of things she wanted to achieve in her life.

The individuals who make up Betty Thompson's circle of community support have known her for decades. Many knew her father and her mother; they know the role that family, friends and church play in her daily life. When speaking to them, you learn that her life choices are highly self-directed. Instead of being called to gather and assist by a third party, it is more accurate to say that Betty herself has assigned work duties.

An example can be seen by her direction of support for her growing greeting card business. "Betty pretty much assigned me to help her with her cards," says Hutton, with a smile. This venture, which she has worked on for several years, has been supported by creative support from many local artists contributing designs. While she is happy with the creative and entrepreneurial satisfaction she gains from this work, she sought to put other facets of her life into motion through the PATH process.

Betty's passion to educate others outside of the church was put into motion this June at the Respect Institute Conference Commencement in Decatur, Georgia. There she spoke on acceptance and inclusion and stated, "I am not to be pitied. You should not pity others like me." Betty looks forward to sharing her experiences and knowledge with others through more public speaking and teaching at universities this year. She has always been a self-advocate and enjoys educating others on accessibility and inclusion. This July she was invited to serve on the board of directors of Citizen Advocacy of Atlanta and DeKalb. A natural community builder, this role will take Betty's voice and influence to an even broader audience.

This past spring she visited Washington DC and is currently planning a trip to the great redwoods of California, a sight she has wanted to see her entire life. With the help of her friends, this dream will become a reality. Hers is a case in which the one at the center of the circle has the power to direct this large group of people in the direction they feel they should be headed. Like the dial on a compass, Betty sets the direction for her community.
