

Candice Jones Peelman

“I really believe in creativity and connectedness.” This is what it comes down to for Candice Jones Peelman. She envisions networks of people with different abilities integrated into the community, working together to foster creativity.

This passion for networking and understanding people’s unique capacities for creativity has led Candice to work with Starfire, an organization that fosters relationships between people with disabilities and members of the community. The aim is to uncover their talents and passions, according to the organization’s mission statement, “so they can thrive in their communities alongside their neighbors.”

“My role at Starfire has evolved over the past nine years, but its core has been the same: to connect people.”

As Executive Director, Candice has worked to connect people with disabilities to writing groups, breweries, radio stations, music groups, sewing groups, and restaurants: wherever there is mutual interest and passion.

Her knowledge of Cincinnati has helped make these connections. “I cannot imagine trying to do my work in a city I don’t have deep ties to.” But being from Cincinnati also presents unexpected challenges to her work: “There’s also sense of risk associated with connecting people, especially to people or places you already know, even more so when the ask is to create a new story.”

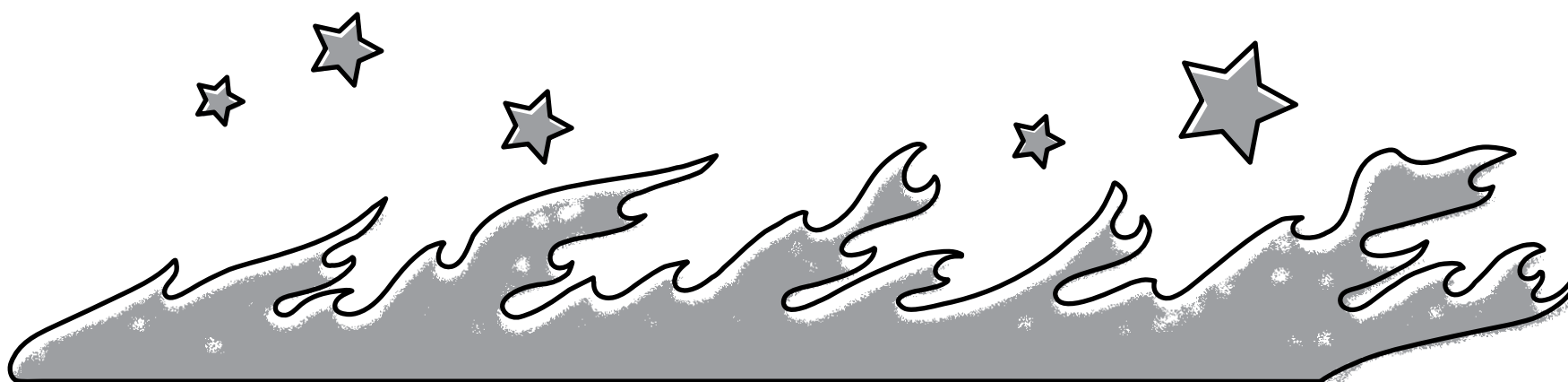
Candice’s early upbringing in Cincinnati fed into her understanding of both compassion and a good work ethic. She was raised by her young mother and her grandmother. When Candice was in sixth grade, her mother married the man she would come to call her father, but he passed away suddenly when Candice was 16. “Our family life was really shaped by that. I don’t know how you move on from that, and I don’t know how [my mother] did. She did, though, and part of that probably comes from her own upbringing: you have to take care of your kids. You’ve got to go to work, you’ve got to move on; you’ve got to pay the bills.” This concept of self-sufficiency was reinforced by her grandmother, who Candice remembers carrying a large, heavy purse; inside: a can of WD-40, a screwdriver, and a ratchet. “In my family, there’s kind of a mantra: you don’t wait for a man to do it anyway.”

So Candice learned early on to roll up her sleeves and find ways of doing things herself. She studied theology at Xavier University, graduated a year early, and began teaching in a Catholic school at age 21; but didn’t stay there long. “I think I was kind of having an identity crisis around: *“Am I Catholic? Do I believe this?”* Some of the things that were really cut and dry that I was teaching were not necessarily things that I believed.”

After returning to school to get her Masters in Education (where she studied inclusive education and the history of segregated education), she was reminded of experiences from her high school years working with nonprofits like the Drop Inn Center (now the Shelterhouse), alongside individuals who really needed support. Some of those memories provoked Candice to begin searching for similar experiences.

“I spent three months with women who were in rehab in a residential facility, and we walked around the neighborhood, and they wrote poems and we put it in a book. I was like, ‘If this is nonprofit work, this sounds interesting.’ There were less rules or restrictions in how you got to know people and how you actually got to help them. So I thought, maybe that’s it.”

Shortly thereafter, she was hired by Starfire, which at the time was focused less on community involvement and more on community outings. The initial work was skills-based, but Candice and the others at Starfire noticed a shifting need in what motivated their students. “We started doing person-centered plans: Let’s sit down and talk about what’s positive and possible in your life. It wasn’t skills based. Michael said, ‘I want to be a



barback' and that's what led me to follow a story to MadTree. And Becky said she wanted to be a gardener; Andy said he was interested in something else. We were like, 'Okay, but that's not what we do here.' During that time, it was also the learning of, 'What do we do here? Are we just the place where people have fun? Is this our role, or is there something more?' We took the 'there's something more' route."

As easy as it might be for many of us to contemplate purpose, Candice acknowledges that it's not so simple for everyone and that sometimes the world forgets to ask the question to people who may not appear to have the same abilities as they do. "I really love that the big questions of *'what's my purpose, what is life all about and what's my grand role in all of it, why am I here, do I matter?'*—applies to all of us. There's something especially powerful for me, though, in working with people with

disabilities who the world already thinks—consciously or unconsciously—have little value or purpose."

Candice began to work connections, through chance and effort, to find the right people in Cincinnati to help people with disabilities tap into their passions and motivations and to find their value and purpose.

"We've been underestimating what people with disabilities can add to the world and what people without disabilities haven't been asked. We were seeing more and more those seeds of possibility that weren't really us doing the work, but what happens when you bring two people together because they both care about media, radio stations, whatever."

For Candice, the philosophy behind her work at Starfire extends beyond people with disabilities: it's about the greater role inclusion and creative collaboration has

among all people in a community. "If people who are devalued have meaning and purpose in the world, that has to be true of everybody. How do you do that with your family, how do you do that with your friends. And why don't we?"

Candice finds herself changing through her work at Starfire with each new challenge. "One of my favorite quotes is Whitman's: 'Do I contradict myself? Very well then, I contradict myself. I am large, I contain multitudes.' I just love it. It's saying I can change my mind, I can contradict myself, I can change, I can grow, I can become a different version, and I can contain two conflicting emotions, beliefs, thoughts, at the same time. It's terribly frustrating for a person like me who likes calendars, to-do lists, and timelines; but it's also incredibly relieving to know that we aren't perfect and we're always in progress. That even small change in ourselves or in others is still change."



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