

A Pioneer of Supported Living for people with developmental challenges.

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In Memoriam
David Denniston
1936-2019
A Hero to Families

Dave Denniston, a resident of Santa Barbara for over 30 years, has been a hero to many families who have adult children with developmental challenges. Sadly, our friend, mentor, and father passed away suddenly in late December 2019. Since his death, many families that Dave has helped have said exactly the same thing: “He changed my life.” Dave has indelibly made an impact on the lives of everyone he knew as well as our community. His time with us on earth will resonate for years ahead.

In life, Dave was a humble and unpretentious person, shrugging off heartfelt expressions of appreciation and refocusing attention elsewhere. He didn’t need accolades. He was a man who thrived on helping — easily setting aside his own time to devote himself to the benefit of others.

As the father of a child with a developmental disability, he forged a path for other families by creating natural supports for his daughter in her home, and then consulting and talking to families throughout the state about his experience and knowledge. He is recognized as a pioneer of supported living — from a father’s perspective. It was his personal touch that made the difference.

About 31 years ago, Dave formed a nonprofit agency — [San Felipe Supported Living](#) — that was one of the first supported living agencies in the state of California. It grew out of a personal need — to provide a better life for his daughter. Its reach quickly eclipsed that personal need when Dave realized that other families wanted the same opportunities that he had created for his daughter. He wasn’t willing to sit back and accept the status quo but wanted to step up and create new opportunities. So, he began helping. One family at a time.

Dave had always treasured the connections he made throughout his life, so it was natural for him to form friendships with the families he met through his daughter. He was respected and loved — from high school to college to his professional career and throughout his years living in Santa Barbara — and Dave maintained his friendships because they meant everything to him. Quirky and quick witted, thoughtful and kind, centered and determined, Dave had a vast array of friends over his life, a testament to his open-minded, easygoing personality.

Dave was uniquely gifted; he had an engineering brain enhanced with a sensitive and empathic heart. These qualities enabled him to simultaneously problem-solve a difficult situation while never losing sight of the people experiencing those difficulties. He always kept his focus, parsing out the meaning in a conversation, finding the core of the problem,

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and lending his support and guidance when needed. He was keenly intent on raising people up, and not pulling them down.

After retiring as an executive with the Digital Equipment Corporation of Massachusetts, Dave continued to work tirelessly on many projects — whether it was the serious business of starting a nonprofit to benefit his daughter and other folks with developmental disabilities, volunteering as docent at the Santa Barbara Maritime Museum, or designing and managing websites for various groups.

He was also serious in play — sailing with friends; listening to jazz and traveling with his companion and love, Rhea; attending Happy Hour with friends; and bantering with his coffee mates — the Codgers on Caffeine — every Friday like clockwork. Dave gave his full attention and energy to all that he did.

One of his friends recently remarked, “God gave us a giant, in the smallest of stature.” And Dave’s vision for San Felipe was never small. Its founding serendipitously coincided with the state’s pilot project for Supported Living Services in the early 1990s, but it was his fatherly involvement that spoke volumes to other families wanting to stay involved in the options available to their child. What makes San Felipe Supported Living unique is that it is family-guided — with the complete collaboration of established support services.

Dave’s desire for his daughter to have a life outside of a predetermined mini-institute drove him to build a community where people who have disabilities live in their own homes, successfully and with some of the best quality of support offered. Families who were previously unhappy with the living options for their adult children realized they had choices and were encouraged by Dave’s success in beneficial care for his own daughter. Individuals with severe challenges, who might have been institutionalized in the past are now living wonderful lives — getting out into the community and making as many decisions as they can while developing long-term friendships with people employed to live with them and supportive of a full life.

Dave made everyone feel important — and that is a very unusual quality. Dave was family. He was family to all of us. And he will be missed dearly.

We love you, Dave. And when you sailed away, a small part of all of us went with you.

The Dave Denniston Memorial Fund continues Dave's efforts to develop supported living services for loved ones with developmental challenges. Please send donations to the Dave Denniston Memorial Fund, c/o [San Felipe Supported Living](#), PO Box 1453, Goleta, CA 93117.