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Dear Aphasia Network Community,

I have made the exceptionally difficult decision that I will be retiring from The Aphasia Network as of June 1, 2021. In December, my husband survived a stroke followed by two neurologic events and I want to focus more time on my family and our needs. The past nine years of serving as Chair of the Board and CEO have been the most rewarding experience I could have imagined.

We purposely built a flexible and strong foundation to support our Aphasia Community through changes like this. The Aphasia Network Board of Directors is recruiting and interviewing for a new Chair and volunteer CEO/Executive Director and already has identified interested candidates. You can view a list of our leaders at www.AphasiaNetwork.org and can also email your interest in volunteering with the organization in any way at info@aphasianetwork.org. As always, our Program Team is busy working on this year's events! If you can provide financial support, please visit the [website](#).

Each and every interaction I've had with members of the Aphasia Community has shaped who I am. In 2000, my mom, Colleen, had a stroke and was diagnosed with Aphasia. After our family was supported by Portland State University's (PSU) Stroke Camp NW during the early years, I felt even more could be done for people that were living with the frustration and isolation caused by not being able to verbally express their feelings, thoughts and needs. When Dr. Lynn Fox (who I consider the Mother of our organization) asked me in 2012, I was enthusiastic to spearhead a nonprofit that could serve this community.



In 2012 with an outstanding team of volunteers from the community and PSU, we started The Aphasia Network, a 501(c)3 nonprofit, to continue the annual Aphasia Camp NW (formerly Stroke Camp NW). We formed our Advisory Council to continually inform us of community needs.

Over the years our programs and outreach grew to meet those needs with the 2014 addition of the Annual Spring Aphasia Workshop in partnership with Pacific University College of Education Communication Sciences and Disorders – a “bootcamp” pairing participants with speech students to address personal communication barriers, OT's to explore independent living, and separate sessions for caregivers. In 2016, we partnered with the same Pacific speech team as well as the Pacific University School of Occupational Therapy to address the specific needs of partners experiencing the stress of living with aphasia at the new annual Aphasia Couples Retreat. This ground-breaking program introduced a multi-discipline approach of pairing Speech and OT students (and volunteer university and medical staff) to address topics like changing roles and the effect on identity, intimacy, and discovering new shared interests.

In 2017, Lisa Bodry – OT and Program Director – and I teamed with a Steering Committee to redesign our annual summer program into Aphasia Camp NW Adventure Weekend. This program, in partnership with Pacific University, was a time for campers and care partners to step outside of their comfort zone with safe supported activities, to explore goals and to experience adventure again. In addition to involving more student disciplines at Camp, a special focus was placed on involving more medical discipline practitioners in staff and mentor roles, creating more stewards of supported communication to help change the culture of communication barriers for our Aphasia Community when they visit medical practices. This was one of the original community needs identified by our Advisory Council. Other programs

developed to connect individuals were Aphasia Community Holiday Parties, Oktoberfest Social and Fundraiser, support of Aphasia Community Support Groups as well as online education, tools, and outreach.

In 2020, we rapidly increased our programming and pivoted to online activities to support our community through pandemic isolation. With the support of Pacific University (our long-term partner) as well as new partnerships with University of Oregon College of Education and Portland Community College Gerontology Department Therapeutic Horticultural Program – we provided the Virtual Aphasia Couples Retreat, Spring Care Partner Program, three seasons of Aphasia Game Club, Fall Gratitude Socials and the Horticulture Therapy Workshop – 30 weeks of vital online connection!

Aphasia is an isolating condition and keeping stroke and brain injury survivors and their care partners connected through community is a passion I shared with so many others.

To the past and present **Board Members, Advisory Council Members, Board of Counselors, staff, volunteers, donors, and community partners** that collaborated to bring the dreams of these programs into reality, you are heroes! I cannot overvalue the impact you have made on individual lives with your problem solving, adapting, funding, creativity, ingenuity, skills, craftsmanship, compassion, and leadership. Your time, talents, sacrifice, devotion, humor, and love made delivering these services together an absolute joy. A special note of thanks to Lisa Bodry, John White, Amanda Stead, and Doug Caudell – you are THE best team, and I enjoyed our journey.

To the many, many **students** (now practitioners in speech language pathology, occupational therapy, physical therapy, physician assistants, psychology, social work, nutrition and public health) who learned and shared with us at camps, retreats, workshops, socials, and game clubs – thank you for choosing healing professions as your life's work. It was a joy to work with you and watch your amazing connections with campers as you navigated through the aphasia communication challenges. Watching you develop and practice your supported communication skills was exciting, knowing that you will carry your experiences with the Aphasia Network community forward and help countless others with communication challenges in your practice.

To the **care partners** – communication partners to our loved ones with aphasia – It has been a great honor that you have let me into your lives. Sharing together the trauma, struggles, grief, triumphs, and joys of loving and caring for our loved ones with aphasia has opened my heart in a way I did not know possible.

To the individuals for whom my deepest passion in this work lies – **stroke and brain injury survivors with aphasia** – I hear you. I see you. I care. I understand your struggle because you have openly shared it with me. I am humbled by your courage and strength. I have been blessed to know and serve you. You belong.
And this community is yours.

It has been an honor and privilege to work with you all.

One of the most touching experiences of my time with you all was the community outpouring of support for me and my family when we lost my mom, Colleen. At that difficult time in our lives, I realized that my family was much larger than I thought. You are my chosen family. Thank you.

Over the past nine years, we have woven a beautiful community to support each other in our growth and healing. I believe that just as a community is not dependent on one member, a community must evolve in order to thrive. I am so excited to watch how new leaders, volunteers, students, persons with aphasia and care partners connect with our existing teams to refine current and to develop new programs and activities of the Aphasia Network community!

Warmest regards,



Suzanne Gardner, Chair and CEO