
Therese Holliday is Meetup Organizer of the Week for April 30 - May 6, 2006

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Join us in congratulating the Meetup Organizer of the Week for April 30 - May 6, 2006: **Therese Holliday** and **The Exceptional Families Network!**

This special Organizer has turned around a personal tragedy into a fantastic opportunity to help others in the same situation.

"Our goal is to create community from isolation."

1. **How did you discover Meetup.com?**

I was trying to find any groups in the Greater Olympia WA Area which focused on children with special needs. I believe I did a Google search, found Meetup.com and was fascinated with the business concept and numerous features. There were no other Meetups in our area which did not focus on a single diagnosis so - voila - I signed up and decided to become the fearless leader!

2. **How long did it take to get your Meetup meeting successfully?**

Our second actual Meetup hosted 25 parents and children because we made it a fun event and marketed in the media: we rented the Hands On Children's Museum in downtown Olympia and closed it off to the public. That jump-started the effort and cost us \$200. I started the Meetup on my own initially but quickly pulled it into our nonprofit, The Wyatt Holliday Foundation (www.WyattsHouse.org), as a Community Outreach Program so it enables us maybe a little more freedom than other groups. Also, I hunted for sponsors and found one that covered our Meetup.com fees for 6 months. We handed out their disabled child-related materials and made families aware of their products for that time period.

3. **What three things would you recommend to all Organizers do to help create a successful Meetup?**

1. Really try to understand what makes potential members tick.
 - What type of Meetup will they need - restaurant/cafe, library, outdoors, special event?
We chose all and rotate to make it interesting. Some families come only to events, some only to Meetups with presenters who address a specific topic they need to learn about.
 - Do people just want to network, learn something or just have fun?
Again, to keep it new and interesting, we rotate.
 - What do attendees want to learn or hear about?
We take suggestions at almost every meeting and act on it. In almost 2 years we have not repeated any one topic or event. There is so much we can do and learn.
 - Why would they attend?
For us, it was simply being with those who understand.
2. Speak to that need in many different ways with passion.
For us it means knowing all of the needs of families that need to be met and doing something about it. For our families it means understanding child advocacy and having someone go to school IEP meetings with them. It means finding respite care and child care of any kind because most centers really do not have the training nor do they care to understand or help. It means having an open communication line so families can call and cry for an hour because the family, friends and neighbors continue to be oblivious to their desperate situation. I don't just organize, I'm there for them. We have 2 assistants who have a background in Juvenile Detention Advocacy and Parent Group Management through another organization to help me with this plus have pulled in advocates from the community to address other advocacy issues. Obviously, our group has grown into much more than monthly Meetups. Today we are known regionally throughout Western Washington State in the disabled community. Also, not everyone wants to sign up online but still wants to be included. In addition to the 89 members online, my Outlook boasts another 70+ members whom I also send notifications and who also attend periodically. Some of these are disability and advocacy organizations who thankfully continue to share our message with their memberships.

3. Don't be afraid to step outside the box and create awareness of your group and its issues. Network and cross-market with other entities (groups, organizations, businesses, schools, government) with a similar focus. Make sure you hit public television, print media and/or radio frequently. Don't just stay inside the city limits, hit everything within an hour's driving distance. Make your message enticing, create a catch phrase, sound upbeat and welcoming! Hang up flyers, hand out invites and business cards! Get the message out there! Have Meetup members post around where they live and share at other groups they attend.

4. **Has your life changed/enhanced by your role as Meetup Organizer?**

Yes - I am very thankful to have our members in my life. I receive thank-you emails now and then reminding me of why I'm spearheading an effort to help families. It continuously opens my eyes wider to the issues plaguing our kids and their families, and the simple art of listening provides more ideas for how to be of service to them. I very much enjoy meeting them and hugging their wonderful kids. They are what it's all about!

5. **What was your biggest challenge? How did you over come it?**

Child care. I realized that families would not be able to attend without on-site child care so we hunted and found a volunteer who was a care provider. She volunteered for a few months but soon was too busy in private life to continue. We went through one more volunteer and found that we simply had to pay someone. Even that has been a challenge, but we network and continue to find a small pool of people to pull from. All meetups except one have had child care so far and it has helped tremendously with attendance.

6. **How did you get the word out about your Meetup?**

We got the word out by contacting disability-related and special education organizations and asking them to notify their families of the event. Then we put press releases in newspapers within a radius of 25-30 miles and posted a notice on the public access TV reader board. One of our members came because she saw a notice at 1:30 AM the day of the Meetup. Subsequently, I submitted 30-second radio PSA's (Public Service Announcements) to broadcasters within 25-30 miles a couple weeks before the Meetup.

7. **What do you do, as Organizer, to get people to RSVP, show up, and stay active between events?**

Honestly, our families are too busy and exhausted to do anything in between. Having a special needs child is a full-time job in itself, we cannot ask for more. Families MUST submit an RSVP either online or to me personally days before the event in order to guarantee child care coverage. Otherwise, this is still a challenge for us as some respond positively and don't show while others don't respond and then show up. Once we had 11 say "Yes" and almost 30 showed. It was "interesting" creating the space to make it happen!

8. **Do you have any "big plans" for your Meetup?**

A resounding YES! Our Exceptional Families Network is going statewide in the next month or so and we will be offering a number of means for our families to connect online such as video/audio/telephone conferencing. Many parents, grandparents and guardians cannot leave their house due to their child's disabilities. Our goal is to create community from isolation. We will be offering a "Swap Meet" area where users can post "give-away", "barter" or "For Sale" items. New features will also allow families to post their stories pertaining to social services, school and provider experiences so that families are aware of the good, the bad and the ugly. In the next year or so we plan to become regional throughout 5 Northwestern states. All of these things are happening thanks to our members speaking up and sharing their needs and ideas. Without them we would not be the successful Meetup we've become - a BIG THANK YOU to them!

To congratulate Therese and share your thoughts, check out the [Organizer's Forum](#). Also take a look at all our awesome [Organizers of the Week](#).

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