

ARC Rutland Area celebrates 65 years

By Sophia Buckley-Clement Staff Writer
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ARC-Rutland Area self advocates Jessie Traverse and Tony Buck pose after testifying before the Human Services Committee at the State House in Montpelier on March 1 for Disability Awareness Day.

Provided Photo

A local nonprofit is celebrating 65 years of service to the community.

ARC-Rutland Area is an organization focused on promoting the personal growth and independence of individuals with intellectual or developmental disabilities. ARC, which stands for the pillars of the organization's mission — advocacy, resources, community — currently serves roughly 450 members.

Originally called the Rutland Association for Retarded Children, the organization was founded in January 1956 with a goal to provide an educational and social forum for people with developmental disabilities. In 1958, the organization received their 501©(3) and founded the first school for its members at the College of St. Joseph — also known as the Havenwood School.

“It all started when Leonard Wing, as his children describe, put an ad in the paper that said (he) had a son who, (as termed) back then, was mentally retarded and that he needed help. ‘Anyone who is interested in educating the mentally retarded in Rutland get a hold of me,’” ARC Executive Director Diane Drake said. “And they all did. (A group) got together and started the Havenwood School.”

Chris Wing, son of Leonard Wing, was only a young boy at the time of ARC’s founding, but said even at that time, it was clear to him that his father was doing some groundbreaking work.

“The idea that he just put that out in the paper I thought was pretty extraordinary. I just think it’s phenomenal because it was so early — (before) anyone thought of special education in Rutland,” Chris said. “ARC is a minor group compared to what has sprung up since then, but still, it has a place in the community.”

Though the Brandon Training School — Vermont’s only public institution for people with mental retardation and developmental disabilities — had been established some 41 years prior to ARC, Drake said ARC’s work is widely considered one of the first instances of legitimate special education in the county.

According to ARC’s website, the organization also helped pave the way for school integration in the state in the 1980s, with integration completely overcoming segregation in the 1990s.

Coincidentally, ARC’s 65th birthday is also the 30-year anniversary of the closing of the Brandon Training School, which statewide disability rights organization Green Mountain Self-Advocates celebrated with a dance last month.

“I know it sounds kind of odd to celebrate that but celebrating a closing of an institution that housed just disabled individuals is a good thing,” Drake said.

About independence

Though its name has changed more than a handful of times over the past 65 years, Drake said the foundations of ARC have remained mostly the same.

“(The concept) really was to be as independent as we possibly could be. Now it is so much more to be independent. What independence is now compared to what independence was back then, 65 years ago, is a huge, huge difference,” she said.

A staple of the organization since its inception, ARC’s dances are one of these concepts that have stood the test of time and have also evolved over the years alongside the organization.

“The dances were originally intended to give members some space to be with their (community),” Drake said. “Because they didn’t have outlets of their own. What we’re doing now, with the same concept of independence and freedom, is peer-to-peer interaction, but you run the show. We’re here to guide and teach self-advocacy skills, so when you’re out in the public and interacting in the community, you can stand up for yourself, say what is not appropriate behavior, and not fear someone’s going to retaliate against you.” Carolyn Ravenna, a member of the local Elks Club who has helped organize ARC’s holiday and Valentine’s Day dances for many years, said in the time she has been involved, she has seen a lot of growth within ARC, its members and their individual communities.

“Families will bring a member (to a dance), but they don’t hover over them,” Ravenna said. “I hope Rutland sees how incredible it is that these organizations are here. There’s a lot of support (here.) ... There’s a lot of people who benefit from ARC.”

The increased focus on independence also extends into other programs the organization, such as the Representative Payee Program, which began in the 1980s and pairs members who are Social Security recipients with a representative who ensures their bills and necessities get paid for, and Aktion Club, a community service group for members that began in 2007.

Building bridges

In the coming years, Drake said she hopes to help ARC continue to build on the self-empowerment and self-advocacy work that has kept it around and successful for so many years.

One of her dreams for the coming year is to implement a life skills room in the organization’s Merchants Row office location.

“(That) is independence — talking about putting a budget together so (members) can actually manage their own funds, having a checking account, remembering what to do to go out the door and go grocery shopping. How do I manage to do that?” Drake said. “It’s really hard work. But the joy of accomplishing one of those things is incredible.”

And in addition to adding skills to members’ toolboxes, Drake also envisions building more bridges to the community through what she calls “ability awareness clinics” for local schools, health care communities and for those working in the courthouse.

The clinics, she said, are intended to reduce harmful stigmas by showing community members what it's like to have a disability as an adult and how to treat, welcome and respect a person with an intellectual or developmental disability.

Currently, Drake said the organization is accepting new members and new volunteers.

"I know my representative payee could use someone consistently for about five or 10 hours a week filing. I could use volunteers to come in and help set up and stay at the dances. I could use someone who wants to be a guide at our Aktion club meetings or self-advocate meetings. Anyone that has some expertise in community work who wants to come in and give a talk, I'd love it. A nutritionist. A nurse. Anybody. Come in and give us a 15-minute spiel," Drake said.

ARC will host its annual members' meeting and Holiday Dinner Dance on Dec. 10 beginning at noon at the Rutland Elks Lodge.

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