

Rutland Herald article published May 15, 2015 **Rutland upRising: ARC: Valuing All Citizens** by Joanna Tebbs Young

ARC-Rutland Area, based in downtown Rutland at 128 Merchants Row, provides opportunities for citizens with developmental disabilities and their families. ARC stands for what they do: Advocacy, Resources and Community.

Lisa Lynch, ARC's executive director since 1998, spent the first years of her tenure getting to know the people she works for and with. She then began connecting with other similar organizations in the area and around the state to keep the information line open regarding developmental disability services. Lynch now spends much of her time securing funding for the organization, but, she says, "I would much rather be helping someone with a developmental disability learn how to work on the next strategic task to meeting their goal."

This is one aspect, Lynch explains, of the Self Advocates Becoming Empowered — Rutland group, in which a group of adults living with developmental disabilities learn how to be active in meetings.

"They learn about the agenda, minutes, reports, goal setting and achieving and how to speak up for themselves through caring and sharing time."

While juggling other tasks, such as attaining and retaining board members, hiring staff, scheduling and funding dances, marketing their programs to the public, and coordinating transportation, Lynch was happy to take the time to discuss the organization to which she dedicates her time. "Seems I could just go on and on about this place."

When and by whom was ARC founded? And for what original purpose?

In 1958, the Association for Retarded Children — Rutland Area was started by parents who wanted a fuller life for their children than what was offered at that time and to provide an educational form for people with developmental disabilities. Over the years the name changed a few times, and as the children got older the organization changed its name to Association for Retarded Citizens — Rutland Area.

Without our local ARC, school integration would not have taken place as soon as it did. By the '80s children with developmental disabilities were going to public schools. However, the children were still segregated from the rest of their classmates. In the '90s integration overcame segregation and it is now common in schools to see a person with developmental disabilities both learning from his/her peers and teaching them also.

During the first decade of 2000, we built an advocacy movement providing parents and individuals with developmental disabilities the resources and skills to advocate for their needs by contacting schools, doctors, legislators, or congressmen. In addition, adults with developmental disabilities learned how to give back to their community through the clubs offered.

What projects or program are you proudest of?

I am most proud of the Self Advocates Becoming Empowered — Rutland and the AKtion Club of Rutland County. The Self Advocates work all year raising money at bake sales, car washes and bringing in pennies to turn all the money collected into gifts for a family they adopt for Christmas at the Boys and Girls Club. They are also getting used to giving trainings at various places; schools, colleges, groups, State House, Friday Night lives. The focus in the training is that people with developmental disabilities have abilities and have the same struggles and joys as people without disabilities. People with disabilities are still more like people than not. No one is good at everything, there is a bit of "un-abledness" in everyone. And turning that around, then, there is also a bit of ability in everyone.

The AKtion Club has grown a garden for the past five years and donated the food to BROCC and Rutland Area Farm and Food Link. The AKtion Club also sends cards to recovering soldiers and undergarments to active

ones, raises funds for Korean War veterans and fire victims, collects pet foods for BROOC and Community Cupboard, operates a regular food drive, and donates their time and abilities in whatever way they can to better their community. Of course, we always need help with transportation and guidance, so if interested in such lovely volunteering, call us.

Another program we offer that is very valuable and I'm proud to offer is the Representative Payee program. This program helps people who receive Social Security funds stay in the housing they wish to live in by making sure that housing, food, clothing and meds are paid for.

And also, when we talk about proud, I think of the Rutland Family Support Network listserv that we helped put together. This is an email-based network of parents, professionals and friends, designed to share information pertinent to raising a child with needs. A parent may ask where to get a certain kind of support, and potentially she could get 10 to 40 answers from various perspectives. We've heard that families not only don't know where to get a service, but sometimes don't know what services are available. This network tries to help to close that gap.

Any favorite anecdote you can share?

Over the years, I've heard quite a few stories about people living with some level of disability giving back to their community, belonging, and being happy. For example, one day we were on a bus heading home from a dance. One rider started singing to a song on the radio. Soon many of the riders were singing with each other on the bus, myself included. Looking eye to eye at each other, smiling with encouragement and satisfaction as we belted out a few songs. The ride back home was so inclusive, the ones who didn't sing seemed to enjoy watching the others who were. And for the moment in time, on that bus ride home, we were all united, belonging together, accepted and OK.

Do you believe ARC is contributing to Rutland's "Renaissance"? In what way?

The programs at ARC strive to educate the community at large as well as our individual members and families. Seeing our clients in the community, doing service projects is an eye opener for some people. The Abilities Awareness training we offer gives an opportunity to try on a disability, thus realizing for yourself that even with a disability you can still be a productive person. And I believe that message, for all populations of citizens, is what will help Rutland look at its citizenship with wiser eyes.

Anything else you'd like to share?

We offer five to six dances or events each year, but when the attendee numbers get too low to benefit anyone, they will no longer be offered. This organization is providing great value to the Rutland area with only three part-time staff, two part-time staff volunteers, and 11 volunteer board members. Funds are needed and so is manpower to help with all the tasks I've spoken to. They would love to have a volunteer help with the SABER and AKtion Club, take ownership and manage it. It would be great to have some fresh faces of enthusiasm on the board. And, if there is something you need help with in the community call the AKtion Club of Rutland County to see if they have time!