

History of the Arc Downriver

Out of the Darkness into the Light

History takes us back to 1953 when Mr. and Mrs. Stephen Quirk, of Wyandotte, first started discussing the need for such an organization in this community. At that time they were members of the Detroit Association for Retarded Children with Mr. and Mrs. Ari Woodruff, also of Wyandotte.

The Soroptomist Club of Wyandotte extended an invitation for the first meeting which was held at the City Hall December 8, 1953. Steve Quirk went door-to-door asking parents, whose names he had acquired, to attend. Some doors were slammed in his face. However, the first meeting was a success, and officers of the newly founded organization were elected. Stephen Quirk was elected as the first President; Fred Durchman, Vice-President; Ari Woodruff, Treasurer and Evelyn Pelley, Secretary. They decided to call the new group the Downriver Association for Mentally Retarded Children. This was later shortened to the Downriver Association for Retarded Children, before changing to the Association for Retarded Citizens/Downriver as we know it today.

Stephen Quirk was responsible for the early progress the group made. His dedication enabled the Association to grow during its beginning years. Subsequent meetings had speakers, and the parents shared their mistakes and successes with raising their children. The members decided to have monthly dues of twenty-five cents to provide funds for paper, postage, books, and other supplies. A constitution was also agreed upon and adopted. Civic groups were approached for their support. The Soroptomist Club of Wyandotte, under the leadership of Evelyn Navarre, offered to sponsor the new group. They were one of the Association's most solid financial and moral backers in the early years.

While the Downriver Association was establishing its' beginning, so were hundreds of other parents in other states across the country forming local associations. To name the time and place of the beginning of this movement would be like trying to isolate the first growth of grass. For truly this is a grassroots movement. Small groups formed as early as the 1930's, but the 50's were when parents coast to coast saw their destiny and went to work.

During the year of 1954 came an invitation for the Downriver Association for Mentally Retarded Children to join the Michigan and National Associations. Realizing that there is strength in numbers, a unanimous vote was cast in favor of this. October 19, 1954 the Downriver Association for Retarded Children formally incorporated under the laws of the State of Michigan. It was during this time that many of the Association's meetings were held at Wyandotte's Garfield School.

On November 1, 1954 a planned program started with 26 children. The students ranged in age from 5 to 20 and came from a dozen communities. Class sessions were from 10 am - 2 pm, five days a week. The first teacher hired by the Association was Miss Gwen Baker. Parents also helped daily in the new program and paid tuition of \$5 per week for their child.

Once started, the Association continued to grow rapidly. By August of 1955 the membership had grown to 150 and the first newsletter for the Downriver Association for Mentally Retarded Children was issued to its members. A year later the United Foundation invited them to join in the Torch Drive. Since that time the Association has received some of its funding from this organization.

Other funding has come from fundraising by the membership and contributions from interested individuals and groups in the community. By 1960, a budget which had started out at \$3,000, had grown annually to \$30,000. The group's organization had become very sophisticated, utilizing its volunteer members to do most of the operations. Twelve standing committees were in place, and the Association had become involved in State and National Association issues relating to mental retardation.

In the early 1960s, Michigan's state institutions were overcrowded. Few communities provided any services to families when there was a problem in raising their child. Parents turned in desperation to institutions such as Lapeer, Caro, and Coldwater. The waiting list for Michigan institutions for persons with mental retardation was 1,627, as of April 1962. Abuse in the institutions was being uncovered due to overcrowding and under-staffing.

The ARC/Downriver worked along with other associations and the state on the problems with the institutions. The group had found the means to being very active in advocating for the "rights" of persons with mental retardation. Together with the state and other local Arcs, they had grown strong, and were a powerful force in influencing these issues. In Michigan, one of the recommendations was that large remote institutions be done away with, and it was stressed that persons with retardation should be brought into the community life and provided with small accessible centers.

Other advocacy efforts were made by the membership in educating the public toward better programs for children and adults with mental retardation. Education and training of teachers for special education was another area where the parents advocated. In 1963, one of the results of these efforts with the Wayne County School authorities was opening the doors of county public schools to children diagnosed as trainable retarded under Public Act 221. That fall, twenty-two children from the Ray Battle Training Center were enrolled in public schools. With vacancies at the center, the Downriver Association for Retarded Children was seeking more information about sheltered workshops for persons with mental retardation.

The Wayne County Intermediate School District revealed tentative plans for the establishment of a regional program for children diagnosed as trainable retarded by fall of 1966. It would be located in the Downriver area and was to include children now being served by the "trainable programs" in these various school districts, as well as all of the Students under 21 at the Ray Battle's Training Center. It was suggested that Ray Battle function thereafter as a work activity program for those over 21 years of age. The long awaited Wayne County Regional Center for Downriver was opened September 3, 1968 for 3 to 21 year old students. The Arc Downriver formed a Special Committee on Workshops and committee members began to look at locations and to investigate other workshops.

The year 1970 was an exciting one for the Downriver Association for Retarded Children. Mandatory special education was closer to becoming a reality. A bill had been introduced into the State House of Representatives which, if passed would make education available for all children with handicaps from birth to 25 years of age. Because of the many efforts, special education for Michigan's children with handicaps passed into law in 1971. Michigan's Mandatory Special Education Act, Public Act 198, says that schools must provide an education designed to develop the maximum potential of every student with a handicap. This Michigan law was a forerunner and guideline for the Federal Legislation Congress enacted, Public Law 94-142, "The Education For All Handicapped Children Act of 1975." No parents of a child with a handicap could be assured of a free and appropriate education for their child. This was a giant leap from the Salvation Army basement of seventeen year earlier.

The history of the Downriver Association would be very incomplete if the subject of fund raising wasn't put into better perspective. There have been raffles, bake sales, dinners, dances, a Las Vegas party, card parties, rummage sales, a dance-a-thon, candy sales, card sales, and many other events. Many faithful members have held a weekly bingos to benefit the Association. Fund raising has always played a prominent role for the organization. It has been the key to providing additional services or helping to fund existing services.

In 1973, through the collective efforts of seven Arcs' in Wayne County, funding for the operation of the Association's workshop became the responsibility of a new agency, Wayne County Associations for the Retarded (now known as Services to Enhance Potential or STEP). The Detroit Wayne County Community Mental Health Board funds this agency.

With mandatory special education and a workshop for their sons and daughters, the Association parents could devote more time to other programs.

As support services and programs became move available in their communities fewer parents found it necessary to institutionalize their children. However, there were still hundreds of new admissions to state facilities yearly in Michigan. The institutions had made some major improvements in resident habilitation since the fifties and sixties. In 1965 there were 12,500 residents in state centers for persons with developmental disabilities. That all time high census in Michigan was reduced to 5,000 by 1979, however, the news media still reported resident abuse, overcrowding, low staff ratios, and a lack of appropriate programs.

On August 30, 1979, the Michigan Association for Retarded Citizens, et al, won a lawsuit in the United States District Court which would change the future for all persons with mental retardation and other developmental disabilities, Judge Charles W. Loiner handed down the "Plymouth Consent Decree." Their lawsuit was started against the Plymouth Center for Human Development when parents and professionals discovered widespread mistreatment and abuse of the civil rights of residents. Judge Joiner ordered Plymouth Center to be closed within three years. He further ordered the creation and maintenance of appropriate community residential alternatives, adequate to meet the needs of individual residents.

The Association for Retarded Citizens/Downriver could see the changes a less restrictive environment had on persons living in group homes. The members have attended many local public hearings to advocate on their behalf. They have provided community education and awareness of the needs of people with mental retardation.

The remodeling of ARC/Downriver Building's lunchroom in the workshop was started April 1979. Kitchen facilities ere added so that a lunch program and food service training program would be available to the WCAR clients. The Association renovated the building's upstairs and began to use these rooms as their new offices. The members donated countless hours of volunteer labor. The lunchroom was dedicated to the memory of Ivan Hensel, in honor of his extra ordinary volunteer efforts.

As of December 1979, there was great concern that persons over age 21 could wait up to three years to get a placement at the workshop. As these parents had so often done in the past, they began to look for another program to meet the needs of this un-served group.

THE EIGHTIES: Building a Secure Future

By 1980, The Association for Retarded Citizens/Downriver was involved in many different areas of services and programs for its members. The annual budget had reached \$250,000 and there was a membership of 350. It was then that a full-time director was hired soon followed by an advocacy coordinator, to help coordinate and administrate the Association's services.

The ARC movement nationwide had also become more sophisticated and organized over these years. An "Action Alert" could be issued from the ARC/U.S. to local Arc's and thousands of letters would be on the desk of a legislator within a few days. This entire grassroots organization had developed into a powerful force able to influence the direction of educational and mental health needs for people with mental retardation.

In 1981, ten Arc's in Wayne County formed a coalition together in order to impact services to persons with mental retardation. They have met during the past thirteen years with local and state governmental agencies representing the interests of children and adults with mental retardation. The group seeks to create new and equal opportunities for the development of programs and services to meet the needs of all persons who are mentally retarded. Members and staff from the ARC/Downriver have contributed valuable input into the ARC Coalition/Wayne County, advocating for increased services for children and adults living in the community with their families. ' The group continues to work toward the goal of a unified, comprehensive service delivery system for Wayne County.

The eighties were not easy years for the mental health system. Severe economic times were responsible for fiscal cuts in many programs and services affecting persons with mental retardation. Every level of government had been forced to cut back its services. One result from this was an increase in pressure from Arc Downriver's, then 550 members, demanding the services their families needed.

Resourcefulness and creativity helped the group to advocate for an increased level of programs and services for persons with mental retardation. The members wrote thousands of letters advocating for responsible decisions from governmental officials concerning funding for day programs, community placement, special education, supplemental security income, and social security to name but a few. Constant vigilance from all Arcs' has helped to keep the system together without losing too much ground.

In February, 1980 one classroom, at Paun Elementary School in Lincoln Park, was rented by ARC/Downriver for the un-served adults who were waiting for day programs. The Adult Creative Activity Program, ACAP, started with eight clients who attended four days a week. Several attempts to have the program funded from the Community Mental Health system failed; thus a small monthly tuition was paid by the participants.

The ACAP Program blossomed to thirty clients by 1982 and was then leasing additional rooms. The tuition could no longer cover the operating expenses, and the Association rejected the idea of a waiting list for the program. Thus a meeting was held at ACAP near Christmas with area legislators and mental health officials. The outcome was a more stable funding source for ACAP with the Department of Mental Health. This allowed the Association to drop the client tuition, and the program continued to develop. ACAP moved to the Smith School in Lincoln Park in August, 1984 to accommodate its enrollment of almost fifty clients.

The ACAP Program had an advisory committee, composed of ARC/Downriver members, who made recommendations to the ARC Board of Directors concerning policy and programming. It added a dimension of strength and personal concern to the program not usually found in other mental health services.

As of 1985 ACAP became Arkay and was then run by the State Department of Mental health. Because of the Arc's initial involvement, a certain number of placements at Arkay continue to be reserved for persons living in the community with their families. The Association's Special Sitter Service was initiated in 1982, but was discontinued when interest was no longer evident.

Southgate Regional Center for Developmental Disabilities requested that the ARC form a parent monitoring group to help monitor the group homes they had developed in the downriver communities. The parent monitors decided to join a larger group called the Wayne County Parent/Advocate Monitoring Group. Today the Monitoring Committee is now a part of a statewide Dignified Lifestyles Program and has the responsibility for visiting approximately sixty-five group homes in the downriver communities and the Southgate Regional Center. It has been a very rewarding job for the volunteers, and one which is essential to the quality of life for persons living in group homes.

The Family Support Subsidy Bill was put into effect in Michigan during the summer of 1984. This law provides a financial subsidy to a family who has a child with a severe handicap, under the age of 18. Local Arc's, along with the ARC/Michigan worked very hard to get this passed. Once again the letters from parents were an effective method of advocacy.