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Lifesharing: Opening Hearts and Homes



Lifesharers Sheryl Grace Ball, her husband Steven Ball, and Leo Tyler on vacation in Jamaica; and Sharon Williams-Gibbs with her husband Joe Gibbs, and John McGrath attending Sharon's son's wedding in Las Vegas.

What does it take to share your home, your family, and your life experiences with someone with a disability? For Sheryl Grace Ball and Sharon Williams-Gibbs, it takes a lot of heart.

Lifesharing, which is fully supported through funding by the Office of Developmental Programs (ODP) of the Department of Human Services, "means living with and sharing life experiences with supportive people who form a caring household." The concept began taking root in 1982, when ODP started to view lifesharing as a viable option to Community Living Arrangements for people with IDD.

For many years now, CI has offered lifesharing as an option. In 2003, the much-loved, CI Team Leader Peggy Salley (Miss Peggy passed away in 2021) became CI's first lifesharer when she opened her home to Mary Alice Singleton, a woman who had spent years at the notorious Pennhurst State School and Hospital. Living with Miss Peggy was transformational for Mary Alice, who died in 2020.

"We've always had a solid number of lifesharing families, almost all of them CI staff," said Christopher Lynn, CI's Director of Operations, who with Emma Doyle, Director of Admissions and Marketing, attended the 11th Annual Lifesharing Conference organized by the Pennsylvania Lifesharing Coalition this past October. "The program meets a very specific need, and there's always been a push at the state and county level to increase its capacity."

For the past 16 years, CI Direct Support Professional (DSP) Sheryl Grace, who recently celebrated 20 years with the nonprofit, has been a lifesharer to Cleo Tyler, "her big brother" as she calls him. Prior to that, she supported Cleo in his CI residence and was happy to have him over to her home to visit on occasion.

When Meg Nielson, recently retired Director of Communication and Outreach who was overseeing the program at the time, proposed lifesharing with Cleo, Sheryl Grace politely declined. "It's not something I wanted to do," she said. "My kids were younger, and I didn't have the space."

When Sheryl Grace's son Steven Jr. eventually moved out, Cleo didn't miss a beat, and it wasn't long before he moved in. Today, Cleo is truly part of Sheryl Grace's family. "I couldn't believe how beautifully he fit in," she said. "I would

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Our Mission:

Community Interactions, Inc. (CI) builds communities of compassion and inclusion for neurodiverse people through innovative services.



Message from the CEO

Christopher Saulino, Ph.D.
President/CEO

As I write this, waiting lists are increasing and demand for services and supports for people with disabilities is greater than ever. But there is good news to report: CI will be expanding its services in the coming year in several key areas to respond to this demand.

Lifesharing has been a service that CI has provided for years, and we are actively pushing to grow this program. Rule changes are now allowing families to hire their own family members to take care of supported individuals, creating a unique and supportive model. We are happy to provide information to anyone who is interested in this opportunity.

We are also launching a Specialized Supported Employment model, enabling individuals with disabilities to work for businesses and receive on-the-job supports. This model is distinctive as it not only empowers our individuals, but also any of our interested employees who want to own their own businesses and hire our individuals to work for them. These are real jobs, adding an innovative dimension to our employment approach. Please reach out to me personally if you would like to explore this innovative opportunity to own and manage your own business.

A heartfelt thank you goes out to our dedicated staff, both existing and new, who have shown incredible resilience and commitment through tough times. I am also grateful to new team members who are injecting fresh ideas and energy into the organization, reinforcing our dedication to quality and mission fulfillment.

We are excited about our growth potential for this year. Our mission remains unwavering – to help people with disabilities, to support them wherever they are, and provide the best quality services possible.

And on a personal note, I wish to express my deep appreciation to Gary Clift for his years of invaluable service to Community Interactions as CFO. I have known Gary for 19 years. During his time at CI, he has been a great steward of the organization and an amazing advocate for people with disabilities. I've learned a lot from Gary and have always found him to be a valuable resource for company matters as well as financial issues. His guidance was particularly crucial as we navigated the challenges of COVID; he was instrumental in helping us get "through the other side." Gary has been a steady guiding force for CI and he will be greatly missed. We wish him a well-deserved retirement.

I also want to extend a special thanks and best wishes for a happy, healthy New Year to our families, stakeholders, and the individuals we support. Everything we do is for you. Your trust in our mission and efforts is invaluable.

Lifesharing

definitely recommend lifesharing, but you have to make sure you have the heart for people, and that you find someone that you are compatible with and who is compatible with you. Also, it should never be about money – it's the completely wrong motive."

"You really have to care and have the heart for this," said Health and Wellness Administrator Sharon Williams-Gibbs, who has been with CI since 2006, and who opened her home to lifesharing with John McGrath, 35, eight years ago. "It's not a job, it's a ministry. It takes patience, structure, and consistency."

Sharon also emphasizes that lifesharing isn't about the money (the monthly stipend supported by ODP). For her it's about wanting for him like she wants for her own family. "To give someone a better quality of life who desires to be in a family environment, experience family love...to be a part of a family."

"I'm a big believer in families are what you make of them," said Christopher. "That's becoming more and more accepted in society with blended families. The traditional model of a family is changing."

Lifesharing is an inclusive approach to living that goes beyond traditional caregiving or support structures. It's about people coming together to create a supportive environment that fosters independence, empowerment, and a sense of belonging.

Contact CI to learn more about Lifesharing and what it takes to become a lifesharing family.

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PEOPLE

Beatrice Jacobs-Ngateh



Beatrice Jacobs-Ngateh was only 14, the same age her daughter Ziva is today, when she left Liberia in 1999 to join her mother Ruth, who had come to the U.S. three years earlier. It was quite an adjustment to say the least, said Beatrice, who was recently promoted to Senior Program Specialist, and this November marked her 16th anniversary with CI.

Beatrice spent her high school years in Durham, NC, living with her older sister Gladys who was attending college at the time. Tragically Gladys passed away due to an illness shortly after Beatrice graduated high school.

The grief of losing her sister, who was only in her mid-20s, affected her plans to attend college full-time. So, returning to PA, she enrolled part-time at Delaware County Community College, where she obtained an associate degree in education. It was around this time that she began working in the human services field, first, for three years with Don Guanella Village as a DSP, and then CI starting in 2007.

While working, Beatrice pursued her bachelor's in special education from Widener University, and credits CI for being very flexible while she was in school. "I love the fact that CI is like a family. They are very considerate of their employees," she said. "If they hadn't been as accommodating, I wouldn't have managed as a single mom at the time, and complete my degree."

Over the years, Beatrice has moved through the CI ranks. "I love working with our individuals supporting their different needs," said Beatrice, who lives in Drexel Hill with her husband Thomas and daughter Ziva. "We meet them where they are, and it means a lot to me to be able to be a part of making a difference in their lives."

Jim Strauss



Community Interactions is excited to welcome incoming CFO James "Jim" Strauss to the CI family. His official start date was November 20th, and one of the first things he's set on doing is learning as much as he can about the organization as quickly as he can.

Over the next few months, Jim will work with outgoing CFO and Senior Vice President Gary Clift, who is retiring from CI after 19 years, and the fiscal team to ensure that the leadership transition

runs smoothly and efficiently. "I'm very much looking forward to continuing and building upon the tremendous success Gary and the team have had," said Jim.

With more than 30 years in finance and accounting, Jim, a CPA who holds a bachelor's in accounting and MBA from St. Joseph's University, spent the first two decades of his career in the for-profit sector until the position of VP of Finance with Bancroft Neurohealth presented itself in 2015. He was looking to change direction at the time, he said, and is glad he did. After six years with Bancroft, Jim became the CFO of Northeast Treatment Centers, Inc., and today comes to CI from Rider University where he was Associate VP for Finance and Controller.

When he isn't deep in finance, budgeting, and analysis, you'll find Jim with his nose in a good book, on the basketball court, and spending time with family and friends. A New Jersey native, he lives with the love of his life of 27 years Kathy in Delran, where they raised sons Ryan, 25, and Brendan, 23.

Joining the CI family, Jim said that for most of his career he was driven to build shareholder wealth. "What drives me today is supporting people who are doing such great work by providing critical services for the most vulnerable among us."

community interactions inc.

FOCUS ON

Melanie Yoho: Fighting for Her Rights



Melanie Yoho with Diane Mignone at the 50th anniversary picnic on June 1st. Melanie has been President of the CI Self-advocates for 28 years, and is looking forward to what 2024 brings.

Melanie Yoho had only been with Community Interactions a year, when in 1995 she was tapped to become president of CI's Self-advocates. Two rounds of voting, with her winning both times, convinced her to take the role, one she's held ever since.

"I was scared to death because I didn't know what I was going to do. This was all new to me," said Melanie, CI's part-time Swarthmore office receptionist who works alongside Gwendolyn Murray. "But I woke up and realized that this was all about the consumers, about what the consumers want. I had to listen to them."

CI's Self-advocates can be described as an alliance of individuals who actively represent their own interests, preferences, and rights. Their work involves advocating for accessible environments, inclusive policies, and

equal opportunities. Through self-advocacy, they strive to empower themselves and others with disabilities, promoting a more inclusive society where their voices are heard and respected. They also like to have fun, Melanie will attest.

The fun, however, came to a halt when the pandemic hit in early 2020. Gone were the regular in-person meetings and trainings, the bingo and movie nights, the outings and trips.

This past summer marked the first time the self-advocates were able to finally come together which was during CI's 50th anniversary barbeque. In October they held their first official meeting since returning to normal.

"The meeting was a great way to start planning for 2024 and get everyone's input of the kinds of events they wanted to do. We're working on the calendar now that will include meeting dates and events, and will go to each home," said Emma Doyle, CI's Director of Admissions and Marketing, who with Director of Operations Christopher Lynn, act as mediators assisting Melanie, when needed, in facilitating meetings and activities

Kicking off the new year, in January, Melanie and other self-advocates will be attending the Everyday Lives Conference in Hershey, PA. She is a member of Speaking for Ourselves, the independent grassroots, self-help/self-advocacy organization run by people with developmental disabilities.

"Melanie keeps everyone together, and everything moving," said Emma.

"As president she has really been the one thread throughout," said Christopher Lynn. "She and the self-advocates have come a long way, but there's still so much more ground to cover."



CI Self-advocates Andrew Bradell and William Chynesky enjoying the group's first outing since before COVID.

Melanie said that if we didn't have self-advocates we would go backwards. She constantly reminds individuals that they have rights, that they have a voice. CI, she said, helped her find hers 28 years ago.

"CI is dedicated to the consumers. That's why I will never leave because I have a good life and a job. We have a good life and we've fought for living rights. We have rights."

HAPPENINGS



Delaware Day Program participant Makebba Bacon in a yoga tree pose during CI's Health & Safety Week, October 16th.



Residents from different CI homes came together at Governor Markham House for a Thanksgiving feast on November 23rd.

SPOTLIGHT ON

Leaving a Fiscal Legacy

After an illustrious 19-year tenure, Gary Clift bids farewell to his role as Community Interactions' Chief Financial Officer and Senior Vice President with a legacy that has left an indelible mark on the organization.

Throughout nearly two decades of dedicated service, Gary has been the financial steward steering CI through various economic landscapes, strategic transitions, and recently a pandemic. His leadership, astute financial acumen, and unwavering commitment have played a pivotal role in CI's sustained success and growth over the years.

"I've been talking about this day coming for a year with my staff and the executive team," said Gary. "We've been planning it for a long time."

Although Gary has officially announced his retirement, he will remain on in a part-time consulting role as Senior Vice President into the new year as he facilitates a smooth handover and helps new CFO Jim Strauss integrate into the organization.

"Gary has helped guide CI in his leadership role for three CEOs," said Christopher Saulino, CI CEO. "He's made sure that we have remained financially viable and stable, and has been very consistent in his efforts, and a steady influence for CI. His



CI's fiscal team (from left) Sara Ware, Gina Fleming, Cathy LaFleur, Gary Clift, Stacy Thomas, Joseph Sebli, and Renee Sutton.

only loses a seasoned financial executive but also a mentor, visionary, and invaluable team player. His contributions will be remembered as a cornerstone of Community Interactions' financial resilience and success. The CI family wish Gary a retirement filled with relaxation, fulfillment, and the joy that accompanies a career well spent.

contributions to the organization have been substantial."

Gary is leaving CI in terrific health, debt free and with a fund balance reserve for emergencies — a major point of pride. He's also very proud of his team in the fiscal department, which as the nonprofit doubled in size became very high tech and skilled. "We cover a lot of ground with fewer people than we did when we were a much smaller organization." You could say the department has evolved with Gary's leadership into a lean, mean fiscal machine.

One question Gary's been asked a lot lately is what his plans are for retirement. "I have a hard time answering that one," he said chuckling. One thing for sure is he and his wife Lesley, who is also retired, will continue their active lifestyle of exercise, daily walks (they're serious walkers), and short getaways. They have a big trip to Scotland planned for May. He also plans to spend more time with his grandchildren, but otherwise will be taking things day by day.

As Gary embarks on this well-deserved retirement, CI not only loses a seasoned financial executive but also a mentor, visionary, and invaluable team player. His contributions will be remembered as a cornerstone of Community Interactions' financial resilience and success. The CI family wish Gary a retirement filled with relaxation, fulfillment, and the joy that accompanies a career well spent.