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CI: 50 Years and Counting



Community Interactions executive staff, team members and individuals came together on Thursday, June 1st to celebrate CI's 50th anniversary at Bellevue State Park in Delaware.

When Community Interactions opened its very first home for eight children on Garrett Road in Drexel Hill, Pa., in 1973, institutions like the notorious Pennhurst State School and Hospital were still in operation. However, their days were slowly numbered and had been since the mid-1950s. It wasn't until President John F. Kennedy signed the Community Mental Health Act in 1963 that the national deinstitutionalization movement began to take off.

This year marks CI's 50th anniversary, a cause for celebration, and reflection of how far CI has come and where it's heading, which for founder and board vice chairman Gerald "Jerry" Saulino is to "survive and thrive into the future."

The deinstitutionalization movement was in full swing when Jerry established CI in the early 1970s. For him the movement was personal — his older brother Albert had been placed in Pennhurst in the 1940s at a time when parents of children with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) had none of the resources and supports that are firmly in place today. For most parents, institutions were their only option.

Seeing first-hand the deplorable conditions Albert lived in at Pennhurst, conditions that all came to public light in the 1980s (Pennhurst was closed in 1987), Jerry made it his mission to get his brother out of there, which he did in 1969. The impetus for CI's creation grew out of Albert's time in the institution and Jerry's drive to ensure that no one ever experienced what his brother had.

"The first ten years of CI were a little rough," said President and CEO Chris Saulino. "In many ways it [deinstitutionalization and community integration] was like the Wild West since progress was very slow, with funding, policies, regulations,



Staff and house parents at CI's first home on Garrett Road in Drexel Hill. Jerry can partially be seen at the back next to the late Father John Bradley. Patricia Saulino, Jerry's wife and Chris Saulino's mother who passed away in 2007, is second from right.

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Our Mission:

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

CI Turns 50

and resources being major issues universally."

It wasn't until the mid-1980s to early '90s that CI started to grow, Chris noted. More homes were opened in Delaware County, and slowly the agency began developing more and more programs, and building its reputation.

CI's growth in the 1990s coincided with the closing of a great number of institutions and stronger emphasis on the rights of people with disabilities that ensured community integration, like access to housing and employment.

As CI grew, so did its footprint and by 2006 with a five-year strategic plan in place, the agency began looking outside of Delaware County to expand its services, opening its first group home in Delaware in 2007, and a year later acquiring its first home in Central PA.

Chris, CI's twelfth executive director in its history, sees CI's growth today in the form of expanded community-based and supported employment services. "We have a solid residential program and three day programs that we've successfully established over the years," he said.

"A big part of our culture and something that has pushed us to expand is our advocacy for people with disabilities," Chris said. "Starting with my father and his vision, to our great team members, we've always striven to advocate for the equal rights of the people we support. We take that very seriously."

Honoring CI Loved Ones and Friends

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- Meg Nielson, Director of Communication and Outreach

PEOPLE

Debbie Camper



Debbie Camper has been with CI for 31 years. In all that time with the nonprofit, she has held the position of part-time DSP. Her mortgage paying job, as she calls it, has been with the insurance company State Farm, a job she's had for nearly as long – 30 years next year.

After graduating from Delaware State University with a bachelor's in biology and minor in chemistry in 1989, and uninspired by a career in research, Debbie took a job at Elwyn where she held several positions. Her mother Jeraldine was a school social worker there, and worked part-time at CI, where she suggested Debbie join her as well.

Within a year with CI, Debbie left her job at Elwyn after being enticed by her brother Thomas to “come to the Farm” and apply to the insurance company. Her degree in biology later came in handy, she said, while working in medical claims.

Originally from Chester, Debbie, an active member of her sorority and travel lover, has lived in Newark, Delaware for the past 22 years. She shares her home with her mom Jeraldine and is close to her brother and all her nieces and nephews. Her father Thomas, whose wisdoms she's held close to her heart, passed away in 2010.

At CI, Debbie works awake overnight Fridays and Saturdays and alternating Sundays at two residences in Pa. Her experience at CI has been deeply rewarding. “We're here to make the quality of life better for the individuals we support, and look out for their best interests,” she said.

Meg Nielson



This spring, Meg Nielson said a bittersweet retirement farewell to her longtime CI family and friends. Her professional journey with CI began 22 years ago on September 10th, 2001. The following day is one she, and everyone, will never forget. “I was in training on 9/11. It was a harrowing start to my new job as a supervisor in the PA Day Program,” she said.

Within four months, Meg, who lives in Swarthmore with her husband Chris, was promoted to Assistant Director of Community Supports, overseeing CI's six unlicensed programs. In 2006, she was assigned to help grow CI's Lifesharing Program, which she doubled in the first year.

One of the highlights of her career was securing a feature story in PEOPLE magazine about Bonnie Brown, an individual CI supports, and her gifted daughter Myra. The story generated a lot of local and national buzz, and Meg noted that the whole experience was exciting but exhausting.

After the PEOPLE fame, Meg was pulled up to Special Projects, where she was involved in organizing several CI fundraising events and other special projects. In 2012, she became Director of Communication and Outreach, a role she held until her retirement this year. Among her many accomplishments in this role was overseeing the production of a Korean documentary, as well as the single largest donation that CI has ever received.

What's next for Meg? She's looking forward to spending more time with her family, her three grown, married daughters and eight grandchildren...and traveling, her favorite activity of all.

FOCUS ON

CI in the First State



CI Delaware's very first home opened in Claymont in 2007.

In Community Interactions’ 50-year history, its biggest growth spurt occurred in the first decade of the 21st century with the opening of its two satellite locations in Delaware and Central PA. It was an exciting time, and the well-established organization was perfectly poised for expansion.

In 2006, with a solid strategic plan for growth in place, CI set its sights on expanding its services into Delaware with an initial focus on residential services. The executive team met with Delaware’s Division of Developmental Disabilities Services and the people they would be working with to set up the nonprofit’s Delaware program.

“Our work centered on getting people in Delaware out of remaining institutions, like the Stockley Center in Georgetown, and into the community,” said CI Managing Director Henry Njenga, who was the boots on the ground in opening CI Delaware. “We knew we could bring our program to the First State and replicate its success.”

CI opened its first home in Claymont in 2007, a home they took over from another agency, and began working with four individuals, one of whom is still living there. Within a few months CI took over two more homes, one in Newark and the other in Hockessin – the homes already supported people with autism. Several months on CI opened two apartments in one complex and then a third.

Initially, Henry was the sole program coordinator overseeing Delaware’s budding residential services. Before long, however, they were able to recruit team leaders for all the new residences. In 2009, Antoinette Trusty assumed the role CI Delaware’s Residential Director.

By this time, the program was already outgrowing its original office space, which was situated in the Claymont home, so a search began for a centrally located office in New Castle County. They settled on an office in Newport within a business complex. CI has stayed within the complex ever since, but moved several times to larger spaces as the program grew. Henry and the team acquired the largest space when Delaware opened its Day Program in 2013.

“We realized that most of the individuals we were supporting were going to one large workshop, where they were not doing anything meaningful in the day,” said Henry. “So, we went ahead and replicated what we were doing in our PA Day Program and began offering meaningful opportunities and activities. We then expanded to the larger community so we could provide more supports and opportunities for individuals.”

Antoinette, who today oversees 10 CI homes supporting 25 individuals, said that for her working in Delaware has been a great learning experience.

“I’ve grown and learned a lot,” she said. “Regulations change often so you have to keep up and keep staff well informed and trained.”



CI Delaware's second home opened in Newark in 2007, months after the Claymont home.



(From left) Greg, Debra and Jason in 2008 when CI took over operations of Elm Drive, its first Central PA home.

process for them.”

“We’ve been able to add new positions like the team lead role and a nurse,” said Christina. “These roles have allowed us to provide streamlined healthcare supports and understand the steps we need to take to provide the best possible care for the individuals we support.”

Christopher Lynn, CI’s Operations Director for Programs and Services, works closely with the team in Central PA.

“You can look at the shortcomings of managing a satellite program from the home office, but when you focus on the strengths, it helps nurture independence, it also helps that Central PA created their own model of client services,” said Christopher. “They don’t have to think of the model of what’s being done in Delaware or Southeastern PA, because although they follow all our policies and procedures, with the softer more tangible things they have more leeway. Some of the benefits are that they think outside the box, and they always have. They put the individuals first, and it helps foster independence.”

“We’re a little island out in the ocean,” said Christina. “But technology today has allowed us to be in the know and up to the minute. I’m not sure I could have said that even a year ago.”

What’s special about Central PA is that they are a tightknit family.

“The beauty of Central PA is that we’re very personable. We’re all in the homes all week long,” Christina said. “For about 75 percent of us from admin down, it isn’t just a job, it’s our family. Who we are, what we do, we connect. That’s where we shine.”

HAPPENINGS



On April 19th, CI threw a retirement party for Meg Nielson, former Director of Communications and Outreach, with team members, family and friends in attendance. President and CEO Chris Saulino presented Meg with a retirement clock to commemorate her 22 years with the nonprofit.



The Saulino family (from left) Jerald, CI founder Gerald Saulino, John, and Chris Saulino, CI President and CEO, at CI's 50th anniversary celebration on June 1st.