

The Arc of Bradford settles into the new Hampton campus

February 27, 2024 by Mark J. Crawford

BY CAROL MOSLEY

Special to the Telegraph

In November 2023, the Arc of Bradford County moved into what was previously Hampton Elementary School. Since then, CEO John Williams has been busy getting the structure set up and programs in place for the Arc's "consumers of services."

They will still maintain the Starke location, with the woodworking program and administration operating from there. It is the adult day training facilities that will now be offered at the newly leased facility in Hampton.

The classroom building is laid out the same as the Brooker school, with classrooms around the edge and the octagonal library in the middle. There are a few books on the shelves, but they are mostly empty, awaiting materials and donations to fill them.

The buildings that sat empty for so long have been a target for petty vandalism and Williams is working on methods to alleviate that behavior. They are looking into security alarms and cameras as one possible option. It's all a part of the process as the building comes back to life with the new activities ahead.

The Arc depends on community support to supplement its government funding through the Agency for People with Disabilities Act. In fact, they've collaborated with the school board, nonprofit organizations and local businesses. The relationship with the school board is win-win, in that the Arc needed to expand its spaces and the school board is delighted to have an empty school building being utilized and rented.

The Arc has a long list of corporate and small business partners posted on their website. Some offer financial support through monetary donations while many local businesses purchase the products produced through the woodshop or even provide employment. The Arc made a presence at the grand opening of the new TJ Maxx that provided a grant of \$10,000. And a grant from Comcast will be used to set up the computer lab at the day training facility.

The woodshop participants produce items for sale such as stakes and pallets, but also make picnic tables. The sale of these handmade products contributes to financial independence and brings a sense of pride for the crafters. The tables are designed with access in mind and have an extension to the tabletop that allows for diners on wheels to roll on up.

Sunshine Industries is the woodshop part of the "business arm" of the operation. The Arc is struggling to make up a deficit now and hoping for new business ideas to help support the agency. As CEO, Williams is conjuring up creative ideas. Williams hopes the locale can be a place where resources can be brought in, such as health care and the food bank, not only for the Arc, but for the Hampton community as well.



The Arc of Bradford CEO John Williams at the adult daycare facility, formerly Hampton Elementary.

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The Arc consumers, including Michael "Robbie" Pickering, helped with food distribution at the Hampton Mobile Food Pantry. Photo by Karen Louque.

The Arc and the consumers of their services not only strive for the maximum personal independence achievable, but they are also proud to be contributing members of the community. On Feb. 3, the Arc joined forces with the local food bank to offer a Mobile Food Pantry in Hampton.

"About a dozen [Arc] staff and consumers volunteered their time to help distribute food," Williams said. He wants the Arc's consumers to be seen as an asset to and integral part of the community.

The adult day training facility offers a variety of life skill and development services rather than any sort of traditional educational programs. The adult day training is geared to the individual's needs and abilities. There is no requirement to attend, and consumers can take advantage of the program offerings as they wish. Some consumers are involved with the work program, such as the workshop or even cleaning jobs at Camp Blanding. All consumers in the work program are paid a salary for their labor. The Arc provides transportation, since that is often a major obstacle for those wanting to participate. But that service comes with lots of expense and its own challenges to overcome.

The Arc's consumers typically engage after they graduate from high school, which is at the age of 22 as a special support for those who need it. There is no upper age limit, and they currently have a participant in their 70s. The Arc provides residence services for 20 people, so they want to be there as long as they are capable of providing the needs right up until the end. The needs vary for each individual's capabilities and the services are geared to provide for whatever is needed.

"I think of everything that you do in your life and think of now you are able to do those things independently. A lot of people we serve are not able to do some of those things independently. So, we're here to help them overcome those obstacles," Williams noted.

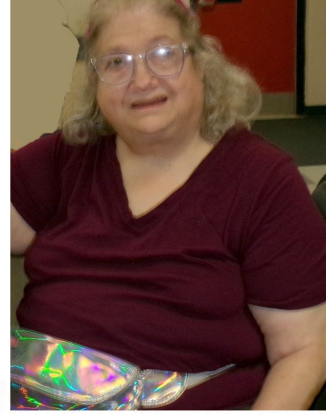
Williams is excited about the possibilities that the expansion to Hampton will offer. The individual classrooms of the main school building can be designed for specific purposes. There are plans for a music room, an art studio, computer lab, even a "sensory room." Moving around to the activities in different rooms encourages mobility and variation throughout the day.

Williams says they hope to get the sensory room set up so that others in the community besides their consumers can take advantage of "multisensory therapy" if they need it.

"The statistics are that one in four people have a mental health concern. When you are talking about people with emotional and developmental disabilities, that number jumps to six times that. So, 60 to 70 percent have a co-mental health issue. And we want to be able to deal with all of that," he said.

What multisensory therapy entails is everything from sand and play therapy and even mats that you step on to feel different textures. There are variations in light levels that have an effect.

"For the people we serve, a lot of times they either need stimulation of their senses or calming of their senses," Williams explained. "For a lot of the people we serve, sometimes they know better than we know what they need. So, if they know they can self-regulate and have these options available, they can utilize them whenever they feel the need."



Patricia Milner is one of the Arc's long-time consumers who joined in the 1970s.



A picnic table designed with access in mind at the Sunshine Industries workshop.

Williams said they have a lot of consumers who participate in the Special Olympics, and he pointed out the bocce ball course outside. Donations of sports equipment and help with setting up a sports area are ways volunteers can contribute.

The community can help in many ways both big and small. A huge impact comes from hiring Arc consumers for jobs they are skilled at or purchasing products from the workshop. But the Arc welcomes donations of needed items in good condition, and you can make an impact by donating things like furniture, books, musical instruments and art supplies. The Arc welcomes volunteers to come and present a program or give their time in other ways.

If you have something to offer, call John Williams at 904-964-7699.

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