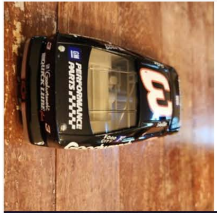


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Milner, Brown honored during ARC Gala

July 22, 2025 by Mark J. Crawford

BY DAN HILDEBRAN

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The Arc of Bradford County honored two people who joined the agency soon after the nonprofit opened its doors half a century ago.

The Arc awarded Pat Milner its Darcia Wells Lifetime Achievement Award during the organization's 50th Anniversary Gala. Eddie Brown received the Arc's Conneely Community Connection Award.

The gala also celebrated the nonprofit's half-century service to Bradford County residents with intellectual disabilities.

Founded in 1975, the organization operates three group homes, where 19 people reside.

The Arc also offers employment at its woodshop, as well as mobile work crews.

Last year, the nonprofit expanded its services by providing mental health assistance to its clients. It also offers life skill development and provides coaches who visit clients living independently, helping them pay bills, attend doctor's appointments, shop and complete other tasks.

'Didn't mince words at all'

Former Arc Executive Director Sherry Ruszkowski and Vivian Chappell presented Milner with the Lifetime Achievement Award.

Ruszkowski said Milner had a strong sense of independence.

"This lady chose to live her own life the way she saw fit," Ruszkowski said of the award recipient. "Through all of the services and things that she accomplished at the Arc, she was able to live in her own apartment. She was able to order pizza whenever she wanted, even though it wasn't part of her diet.

But she had a very, very strong sense of independence as well."

Chappell, who supervised a group home where Milner stayed, said Milner did not hold back when expressing her opinion.

"She let me know, every day, what my job was," Chappell recalled, "Didn't mince words at all."

Sold 500,000 newspapers

When presenting the Conneely Community Connection Award, two of Brown's former employers, Hatcher and Miller, emphasized the honoree's perception and communication skills.

"He sees things that only Eddie can see," Hatcher said. "He understands people. He looks at them and he knows them. And for me, I can't say what a great blessing it is in my life to know Eddie Brown."

Hatcher employed Brown at the Western Steer for over 20 years, and the award recipient worked for Miller at the Bradford County Telegraph over the same period.

Miller credited Brown's mother for securing an education for him at the Florida School for the Deaf and Blind in St Augustine.



Sherry Ruszkowski (left) invites Pat Milner to say a few words after Rutkowski and Vivian Chappell (center) presented Milner with the Darcia Wells Lifetime Achievement Award.



Harry Hatcher (left) and John Miller (center) present Eddie Brown with the Conneely Community Connection Award.

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"Eddie Brown's got a good support system besides (a good) heart," the Bradford County Telegraph publisher said. "He's got aunts and a brother who takes care of him, and Johnnie (supported living coach Johnnie Robbins) is a godsend in so many ways. We cannot thank her enough for what she does in this community."

Miller called Brown his partner in crime while the two worked the press at the newspaper over the years.

After assisting the publisher with press operations, Brown then sold newspapers door-to-door in downtown Starke and in front of the Telegraph's office on West Call Street.

"Eddie Brown sold over 500,000 papers," the publisher declared. "He showed up every day on time and showed up many days when he didn't need to show up."

Miller added that on the few occasions that Brown missed handing out Telegraphs on Call Street, the newspaper would get up to 40 telephone calls asking where he was.

"We wish there were more in Bradford County and in the world that took care of themselves as well as Eddie Brown," Miller said. "He represents Arc to the very highest."

Every day is a day to celebrate

Arc Executive Director John Williams reflected on his time leading the organization.

"We've had a lot of successes," he told the audience. "We've had a lot of times where we see people really triumph. They learn a new skill, they learn how to do something, and there's such joy and pride in that accomplishment. And those are the moments that we really, really cherish."

Williams said that although he was hired to teach people with developmental disabilities, they have taught him more than he has taught them.

"Day in and day out," he said, "I've learned more from them than I could ever teach them."

Williams added that one lesson he learned from a client at his previous post in Palatka is that every day is a day to celebrate.

"Whenever I first started over in Putnam County," Williams recalled, "there was an individual who, whenever I'd come up to him and say, 'Hey, how's it going?'"

"Going pretty good," the client would reply. "Today's my birthday."

"Three hundred, sixty-five days a year," Williams added. "Why not? It's like every day is a celebration. Every day is a day to celebrate. I learned that."

The executive director added that breaking tradition, taking risks, and accepting failure are essential in leading a shoestring operation that seeks to help society's most vulnerable.

"For a lot of the individuals that we support," he said, "they're not going to get it on the first try. And so, you have to come at it from a different angle. So, I learned to try things until I figured out a solution."

"I learned that sometimes things don't go as planned," he continued. "Every single day, I've learned things don't go as planned, but I know that there's always tomorrow and we're going to try it again."

Williams said the Arc leadership made the strategic decision to change the way the nonprofit's clients engage with the community. He said he wants the Arc's clients to be seen as contributors, givers and supporters in Bradford County, rather than just the recipients of the goodwill of others.

"One of those ways is we have started partnering with Feeding Northeast Florida," he said. "We want people in the community to know that the individuals we support can give back as well. And let me tell you, some of them work harder than anyone on our team."

Williams added that Milner and Brown were among the first six clients of the Arc of Bradford County after its founding in 1975.

"They've been supported by this agency, and for 50 years they've been pillars in this agency," he said. "So, we wanted to take tonight as a moment to recognize all that they have accomplished."



ARC Executive Director John Williams said of the organization's consumers, "They are our friends. They are our family. They are the people that we care about. They're the people that we spend our lives with, and I couldn't be happier about that."



Belief in the value of every human being

Sheriff Gordon Smith rounded out the program with a fundraising appeal.

He said the Arc's impact on Bradford County has been undeniable and asked if it were not for the 50-year-old organization, who would have helped the countless individuals the group has assisted over the past five decades.

He said that every dollar invested with the Arc



Billed as the Arc Singers, this foursome danced much more than they sang, and brought smiles to the faces in the audience.

is an investment in someone's future.

"The strength of a community is measured not by how it treats its strongest, but by how it lifts up those who need a hand," he said. "I

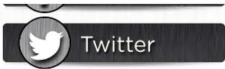
found that quote. It just touched me."

He concluded by pointing out that the nonprofit cannot accomplish its mission on its own.

"The Bradford Arc's work doesn't happen in isolation," he said. "It happens because of people like you who show up with open hearts, with generous hands, and with the belief in the value of every human being."



(L-R) Former ARC board member Scott Roberts with former executive directors Sherry Ruszkowski and John Conneely.



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