



encore

Southwest Michigan's Magazine



Search

HOME / GOOD WORKS / PROUD TO BE HOME

Good Works

Proud to be Home

ROI helps disabled to 'be as independent as they can be'

AUTHOR: ANDREW DOMINO

PHOTOGRAPHER: COURTESY

DATE: OCT 01, 2018



ROI client Sharon talks with staff member Jim Shields. (Courtesy photo; clients' last names are not used to maintain privacy.)



The work of Residential Opportunities Inc. in caring for those with physical and mental disabilities isn't often visible to others, but after 40 years in Kalamazoo County, ROI is getting noticed.

"We go to a restaurant with (clients) and staff, and when we go to pay the bill, it's already been paid," says ROI's CEO, Scott Schrum.

That's because ROI has grown from an organization that began in 1978 as an effort to "deinstitutionalize" those with intellectual disabilities to an organization focused on improving quality of life for the individuals

they serve by providing housing, medical care, education, job training or whatever those individuals need to be as independent as possible.

ROI provides services to hundreds of people in the county, making it the largest provider of care for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

“We focus on the word ‘home’ and what it means,” Schrum says. “We want to help people be as independent as they can be. Part of that is having friends, relationships and family.”

Seeking independence

The establishment of ROI was prompted by something that had happened hundreds of miles away. A 1972 TV report by a young Geraldo Rivera exposed unhealthy and dangerous conditions at Willowbrook State School, a New York City facility for children with intellectual disabilities. The report prompted public attention to care for the developmentally disabled around the country, including in Kalamazoo.

Schrum said conditions for people with disabilities weren’t the same in the Kalamazoo area as they were at Willowbrook, but they weren’t what they needed to be. Institutions housing the disabled were scattered around the state, with the closest one being in Coldwater. Schrum said the facility was understaffed and unable to keep everyone appropriately clean and fed.

Several organizations, including the Kalamazoo Foundation (now the Kalamazoo Community Foundation), the Kalamazoo Association for Retarded Children, Kalamazoo Community Mental Health and the Kalamazoo United Way formed ROI in response. Its doors opened in 1978.

Today ROI serves clients in three broad groups: people who will always need round-the-clock care; those who will always need care, though not 24 hours a day; and those who can go on to live independently.

Most of the people ROI helps come to the organization because their families need support to care for them or because their families don’t have the resources to care for them appropriately. ROI, in turn, is funded primarily by Kalamazoo Community Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services (KCMH) and Medicaid dollars. KCMH contracts with ROI to provide services for individuals with disabilities in the region.

Because most of the individuals ROI serves just need a place to live and friends who are at their level of development, ROI established group homes throughout the county. It started with five group homes for adults, a number that has grown to 18, and those homes now house 125 people. Some of the individuals ROI serves may need medical treatment, while some may require assistance with basic tasks like bathing and getting dressed. Others are getting help to learn new skills to become more independent or to look for a job appropriate for their ability levels.

Working with MRC Industries in Kalamazoo, ROI’s clients can become workers in fields like assembly, packaging and food service. In 2017, MRC served 184 people, though its director of human resources and community relations, Bonnie Sexton, says she doesn’t have an exact number of those referred by ROI. ROI also has a program that helps 250 of its clients manage money they earn from jobs or SSI (Supplemental Security Income) benefits.

“Along with a job comes independence in other parts of their lives too,” Sexton says.

Related Article: MRC Artworks helps disabled artists build esteem through creativity

Helping younger clients

The bulk of ROI's clients are adults, but the organization has expanded its support and services for children and teens. In 2012, it opened the Great Lakes Center for Autism Treatment and Research. Children and teens diagnosed with autism live at the center, where they learn to manage their disability as they meet with professionals for 10 or more hours a week. The center opened an outpatient office in Galesburg in 2015. This fall, ROI opened a location in Comstock for young people who are ready to move on from the center but aren't able to return home.

"We have a variety of children who have met their (treatment) goals but don't have a place to go — maybe they're from foster care or their families can't take them back," Schrum says.

Kelly Pasch of Portage says her daughter Maris at age 3½ had difficulty making eye contact or communicating with others, though she was capable of repeating large sections of movie dialogue. After being diagnosed with autism, Maris came to the Great Lakes Center, where Pasch learned about applied behavior analysis therapy. ABA therapy breaks daily activities into small tasks — for example, learning to brush your teeth starts with learning how to hold a toothbrush and open a tube of toothpaste. When the patient accomplishes a task, it's rewarded.

"You praise positive behavior to reduce negative behavior," Pasch says. "Without (ABA), we wouldn't be where we are now."

Maris, now 7, attends public school. Pasch says she's always welcome back to ROI and the Great Lakes Center.

"I can stop by anytime and ask questions," she says. "They treat you like you're family."

Tags:

[disabled adults services](#)[Kalamazoo nonprofits](#)[group homes](#)[Autism](#)

Category:

[Good Works](#)

Ghostery blocked comments powered by
Facebook Connect.

