



The ARC's local golf tournament raises funds for their many programs



The Fort Bend County Golf Classic Putting Contest

THE ARC OF FORT BEND COUNTY

Enriching the Lives of Disabled Adults



ARC volunteers help out at an area fundraiser

Written by Christy Collins

“Every person is a unique combination of mental, physical, and emotional abilities that change over time. As we age, we may face limitations, but we still can enjoy life. Likewise, individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities – whether occurring at birth or following an injury – want and deserve to enjoy an abundant life.” This statement from their brochure is the driving force behind every action of The Arc of Fort Bend County (FBC). Formerly known as the ARC, The Arc of FBC seeks opportunities to maximize the quality of life for those persons with mental retardation and other developmental disabilities. It’s a noteworthy organization, and one that deserves participation and attention from county residents.

MEETING A NEED

The Arc was born out of a grassroots organization of parents dating back to the 1960s. These parents had children with special needs, and they were at a loss as to how to help them integrate into society. As medical technology advances, children with special needs are living longer, becoming adults, and outliving their parents. Consequently, parents are concerned about how their children will care for themselves into adulthood. Caring for a child with special needs can be extremely exhausting and isolating, and parents and caregivers alike need a network of support. The bureaucratic cogs for governmental resources are hard to navigate, and training and advocacy have

become necessary. To combat this need, Laura LaVigne, executive director of The Arc, strives to communicate their mission through public speaking engagements to employers, clergy, service providers, teachers, and local legislatures.

PROVIDING SPECIAL PROGRAMS

Cheryl Sewell is a full-time employee of The Arc who works with families and schools to plan how to include children with disabilities in the regular classroom. She assists with school Admission, Review, and Dismissal Process (ARD) meetings and equips families with the information they need to best advocate for their child. Sewell also arranges social activities for both disabled and non-disabled children to interact in fun settings. Picnics, fishing outings, dance lessons, billiards, and even a mall treasure hunt are organized. In addition, adult self-advocacy training and recreational activities are organized by Program Director Nancy Dobert. Monthly activities include dances, sporting events, barbecues, lunches, movie theater trips, seasonal parties, and weekly bowling. The Arc provides transportation and admission fees. The Arc also affords access to group living facilities and information to parents about obtaining guardianship of their adult children with mental retardation.

THE ARC IMPACT

An important initiative has begun to provide education beyond high school for adults with disabilities. The Arc of FBC, in conjunction with Wharton County Junior College, has created the Adult Success program. It involves specialized training in certain fields to assist in job employment and retention. In the pilot season, six of the eight students involved have been successfully employed. As adults, persons with mental disabilities must learn to care for themselves. The Arc of FBC can greatly benefit from the provision of scholarships by concerned donors so this program can continue to grow in breadth of lives touched.

Another widely advertised program is Special Olympics. This provides year-round sports training and athletic competition to adult members of The Arc. The organization is always looking for qualified volunteers to referee, coach, and help in various ways. In addition, unified sports include non-disabled participants, and this is a great way to become involved.

Perhaps the most important way to get involved with The Arc of FBC is to contribute financially. The organization raises money through two major fundraisers, which account for over 50% of the Arc's annual income. Only 4% of their income is spent on preparing for these events, due to phenomenal individual and corporate donors. There is a yearly golf classic held during the summer, and each November, the "Best in the West" barbecue, dance, silent and live auction is held at the George Ranch Arena. Volunteers are always needed to donate auction items and attend the events.

MAKING A DIFFERENCE FOR LOCAL FAMILIES

Cynthia Villarreal is a community member who has a daughter with Down Syndrome. She heard about The Arc through a parents' support group at her daughter's school. Sewell helped her successfully conduct ARDs at her daughter's school. "The parent training The Arc provides is great. You can pick and choose something that works for you from hearing what other parents say. It's the fastest route to being successful with your child," says Villarreal. These support groups can provide a wealth of information and prevent unnecessary frustrations. Villarreal also encourages local neighborhoods to get involved by including special needs children in various local activities.

Who Does the Arc Serve?

The Arc serves those who are injured and consequently have a delay, those with fetal alcohol syndrome, those born with rare chromosomal and genetic disabilities, and persons with autism.

- Three percent of the general population has mental retardation
 - 14,795 persons in Fort Bend County
 - 613,955 persons in Texas
- One out of 10 families is directly affected by mental retardation
- Ninety-nine percent of people with mental retardation live in our communities with families, friends, or in community living residences
- One in 150 children has autism
- Approximately 994 children in Ft. Bend County schools have been diagnosed with autism
- Autism is 4 to 5 times more prevalent in males than females

Courtesy of arcoffortbend.org

Whether you're donating time or money to The Arc, you can help spread information about this organization and its importance. By being a conscientious community member, lives can be changed. SLM

CHRISTY COLLINS is a Licensed Master of Social Work. She resides in Missouri City with her husband and two daughters.

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