

Messenger

Spring 2020



Driving for inclusion— together.

Our ambassadors from left to right:
Carl, Arlene (Michael Waltrip in red),
Anthony, Jordan, Kurt and Chris.

**PLUS AN UPDATE ON OUR
COVID-19 RESPONSE**

An extraordinary 2020

Friends,

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed so much about our lives. As I write to you today, all of Team Bethesda continues to be engaged in the effort to protect the health and well-being of people we support, our employees and our communities.

We've done all we can right from the beginning. As our homes began to shelter in place and we closed our day programs, we made a commitment to frequent and open communication. We have held dozens of live town hall meetings with parents, guardians and employees to explain developments and answer questions.

We also immediately considered ways to keep people active and engaged through technology. We have connected parents and guardians with their loved ones through Zoom video chats and provided a connection to faith via online resources. We further developed a robust series of online classes and events for the homes, including a weekly nationwide dance party—which will continue once COVID-19 passes.

Yes, as hard as it may seem to believe, this will pass. Looking ahead to that time, we are continuing to develop new and innovative programs to promote independence. In this issue you can read about progress we have made on Bethesda Cornerstone Village in Victoria, Minnesota. We also are committed to promoting the need to include people with disabilities, and while Developmental Disabilities Awareness Month in March was cut short by COVID-19, this important work continues.

For now, I encourage you to visit BethesdaLC.org for frequently updated information about COVID-19. Additionally, please know that while we are committed to doing all we can for the people we support, we face a significant and ongoing financial challenge. More than ever, we will need your help. We cannot do what we do without you.

Thank you for your support of Bethesda's mission. Please stay safe and healthy.

Regards,



A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Mike Thirtle". The signature is stylized and fluid, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Mike Thirtle, PhD
President & CEO Bethesda

Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.

- Galatians 6:2 NIV

Bethesda Cornerstone Village making progress

On a beautiful summer day in 2019, Bethesda broke ground on Cornerstone Village in Victoria, Minn. Once complete later this year, this new residential concept—truly a first of its kind—will integrate people with disabilities with adults of all abilities 55 years and older.

Besides comfortable and convenient living environments, the idea is to forge independent lifestyles and tight ties to the larger community. As construction has continued through the winter and spring months, excitement has grown.

“We’ve had tremendous interest so far from prospective residents, starting the day of the groundbreaking, and occurring before our marketing efforts began in earnest,” said Tom Campbell, Bethesda Vice President of Real Estate, who oversees both the planning and execution of Cornerstone Village.

The project will help alleviate a growing need for housing for people with disabilities, with subsidized rents and smart home technology to enable lifestyles with a measure of independence.

A connection to faith will be a critical component. “Cornerstone Village presents an opportunity for residents and local congregations to connect with people of all abilities to share the good news of Jesus Christ through worship, service projects, Bible studies, and prayer.

Pastor Mark Shockey of St. Peter’s Lutheran Church in Edina, Minn., believes in the concept. His church hosted an information session about Cornerstone Village on behalf of Bethesda a few months ago. That evening, as he listened intently to speakers and viewed videos of people who could potentially benefit, he was moved. “I was surprised. It was powerful,” he said. He imagined the sense of independence individuals with disabilities would have, and the peace of mind their families would experience.

“It got me thinking about all the young people who could have an Alexa-powered apartment with safeguards, and interaction with seniors, in a caring community,” he said.

Encouraged by the initial reaction to Cornerstone Village, Bethesda is looking nationally for other locations that may be prime opportunities for Cornerstone communities. The organization is looking for churches with the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod (LCMS) that might be sitting on nearby land that’s ready to sell. Church leaders are asked to contact Campbell at 414-828-6697 to discuss opportunities.

Campbell noted that the project would not be possible without the Lutheran Church Extension Fund, which is providing financing for the project. “They have been a very supportive partner, he said.

More information can be found at BethesdaCornerstoneVillage.org.



Driving home a message of Developmental Disabilities

In our last issue, we gave you a preview of our plans for the month of March, which is National Developmental Disabilities Awareness Month. And while our plans were interrupted by COVID-19 (more on that later), we still made huge strides toward promoting our message of love and inclusion.

Each year in March, the nation recognizes National Developmental Disabilities Awareness Month. At Bethesda, we do more than simply acknowledge the occasion; we celebrate it and focus on raising awareness of the progress that the more than 6 million Americans with an intellectual or developmental disability are making, while noting there is still more work needed for true inclusion.

United by our campaign theme, Include All Abilities, we set out to give people we support once-in-a-lifetime opportunities, as well as raise awareness around our message that people of all abilities should be included in all aspects of life—including at work, at church, at home and in the greater community.

To kick off the event, 30 people we support and staff in Fort Wayne, Ind., attended Winter Jam, the largest Christian music festival, to show their community what true inclusion looks like. They sang. They danced. They got to meet Crowder, the show's headliner. They even made a splash on the local news, helping us tell our story and share our mission with an even broader audience.

And on March 1, thanks to a partnership with Motor Racing Outreach, five people we support—our ambassadors—attended a NASCAR race, the Auto Club 400, in Fontana, Calif. They were treated to a day full of excitement, from meeting NASCAR legend Richard Petty to riding in the pace cars with two-time Daytona 500 winner

Kurt Rutzen, disability advocate for Bethesda, hams it up with Richard Petty, legendary NASCAR driver.



Inclusion during National Awareness Month

Michael Waltrip to watching the race from a private suite—just to name a few—all while spreading awareness to a large audience about people with disabilities and all they can achieve.

While several other events we had planned were ultimately postponed—including attending an L.A. Clippers game, throwing out the first pitch at Milwaukee Brewers game and more—many of our efforts are continuing to make an impact. For instance, several online resources we built, like a curriculum to support churches that wish to include people with disabilities, are still being accessed and downloaded today—a heartwarming reminder that our communities continue to rally around our cause, even during this extraordinary time.

No, this wasn't the month we planned. But the work we have done—and will continue to do—will reverberate throughout our communities for months and years to come. Because our message is strong. Our hearts are pure. And our dedication to promoting inclusion for people with disabilities has not wavered—and it never will.

Want to learn more about our efforts during National Developmental Disability Awareness Month? Go to IncludeAllAbilities.com. There you'll find videos, bios of some of the incredible people we support, resources to help you support inclusion in your community, and so much more.



Cameron, a person we support in Fort Wayne, Ind., helped spread word of our mission with local news outlets.



**Developmental
Disabilities
Awareness Month**

Include *All* Abilities

We introduced a new campaign symbol designed to reflect people with disabilities' desire to be included.



Discovering community

As the month of March rolled around, Team Bethesda was filled with anticipation. We were looking ahead at what was going to be our biggest National Developmental Disabilities Awareness Month ever. We had exciting partnerships. Incredible opportunities for people we support. Appearances scheduled at events around the country, including concerts, professional sporting events and more.

We were ready to change the world for people with disabilities. But instead, the world changed around us as COVID-19 tore its way around the globe. And suddenly our emphasis shifted from promoting community involvement for people with disabilities to keeping the people we support out of the community—and out of harm's way.

Watching our carefully laid plans for National Developmental Disabilities Awareness Month fall apart one cancellation at a time was disappointing. Watching the citizens of our country retreat into their homes, turning once-bustling public spaces into ghost towns, was frightening.

But even during times of darkness, there is light. And nothing has been more inspiring than watching the Bethesda community.

The people we support. Parents and guardians. Our staff. Donors, partners, advocates, volunteers and more. All have not only come together during this time, but have done so with love, grace and compassion. Because no matter what changes are happening in the world around us, there's one thing that will never change: our collective dedication to helping people with disabilities live full, rich and healthy lives.

Here are just a few of the ways our incredible community has united to help us get through this trying time—and to do so stronger and better than ever.

Real-time communication

To keep up with the rapidly evolving situation, we scheduled multiple live Q&A phone sessions with President & CEO Mike Thirtle, as well as other leadership from the organization. This gives parents, guardians and others who have loved ones supported by Bethesda the opportunity to connect directly with us; we are taking every step to protect the people we support and want the families who trust us to have complete transparency and involvement. After all, we're all in this together.

We've also increased our communication through email and texting to help assuage any fears or anxieties. In times of uncertainty, information is precious, and we want parents and guardians to know they and their loved ones are our top priority.



Four women we support in Chaska, Minn., stay in touch with their families by writing letters. From left: Shelley, Stacy, Krissy and Katie

during a crisis

Community

Now more than ever, we recognize the need for togetherness. To that end, we've put together a number of resources meant to provide enrichment and comfort for the people we support and staff alike.

A weekly live prayer service held every Thursday offers comfort and communion as staff from around the country join together to pray. Bethesda staff is also providing recorded devotions to ensure anyone seeking serenity in God's Word can do so at any time.



Above: People we support in Coon Rapids, Minn., worship together during a weekly live prayer service. Right: Sammi enjoys her Easter basket.

Out of necessity, we implemented a strict no-visitors rule for our group homes—a decision that was undoubtedly correct, but nevertheless difficult, as family and friends are great sources of peace during difficult times. But our IT team rushed to distribute more laptops and tablets to our group homes around the country, as well as streamline a virtual visit option to allow people we support to remain connected with their loved ones, even if they can't physically be together.

Keeping the people we support safe also means keeping them at home for the time being. But that

doesn't mean we're any less dedicated to helping them lead rich, fulfilling lives. In addition to everything our amazing staff was already doing, we built out a resource center to provide them and the people we support with an endless supply of ideas for crafts and activities, music, sermons, and even jokes. And we're updating the site every day to make sure the content stays fresh and exciting.

Advocacy

At a time when bills are being rushed through the Congress and policies are changing quickly, it's imperative to make sure the people we support and our staff are accounted for. We initiated a campaign advocating for people with developmental disabilities and Direct Support Professionals and received a greater response than we ever have before, with hundreds across the country writing to their national and state elected officials to encourage them to include people with disabilities in their COVID-19 response plans.

These are trying times. But thanks to YOU, we know we will get through this, and we will be stronger together.

To learn about our COVID-19 response, go to BethesdaLC.org/COVID19.



A lifetime of teaching, encouraging and giving

The Carol Abraham story

Carol Abraham loved nurturing young minds. For 34 years she worked as a teacher in the Milwaukee public schools where she taught high-school English and special education. Although she had many other teaching opportunities, Carol believed she could do the most good and help more children by staying in Milwaukee.

Every spring, Carol would buy and collect school supplies for an annual summer trip to Kenya, where she would teach school. Each year, she would “adopt” a Kenyan student and help pay for their education. Carol was humble in all she did for others because she was doing what she loved: teaching and nurturing.

“Carol always had a compassionate heart.”

Former students would get in touch with her and thank her for being tough yet encouraging. As one former student put it, “Ms. Abraham saw potential in me when no one else did.”

Driven to help people of all abilities

Early in her career, Carol also developed a love for helping people with disabilities, leading her to teach special education classes, volunteer for the Special Olympics and provide financial support to Bethesda Lutheran Communities. She would buy crafts for Bethesda residents. Carol was determined to help people of all abilities and circumstances reach their full potential.

Later in life Carol developed health issues and was diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease. She was no longer able to travel to Kenya, but she continued to support Bethesda.

Carol’s lasting legacy

After Carol went home to heaven, she left a substantial portion of her estate to Bethesda. In honor of Carol’s lifetime commitment to education, her final gift was used to purchase tablets, smart boards, and other new technology for our group homes across the country. These items are now a vital and integral part of our innovative support for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Carol would be excited to know her love for and commitment to education continues in the lives of so many here at Bethesda. Her cousin Don summed up Carol’s life best: “Carol always had a compassionate heart for children in need. It didn’t matter if they were in Milwaukee, Africa or the people who lived at Bethesda, she always wanted to help.”

And through her generous bequest Carol is still helping today.



Carol Abraham



Inspired by Carol’s generosity?
Donate today at BethesdaLC.org/Donate.