Avenues celebrates 20 year milestones!

• In 1997, we began to “build” life-long commitments with participants from the Builders of Skills program, including resident Connie Koshaba (page 2)

• Twentieth “Emerald” Anniversary of Irish Fest (page 6)
Avenues celebrates 20 years of “building” life-long commitments with the Builders of Skills

In 1997 when Avenues had the opportunity to expand our program with Builders of Skills, a small, grass-roots organization that supported adults who were deaf and had other disabilities, the board of directors knew they were making the right decision.

And so did the families of those young adults. “What convinced me to join Avenues was that long-term care and commitment for their participants was a top priority,” recalls Bob Healy, who at the time served as Chairman of the Board at Builders of Skills. Bob’s son Kevin lived in one of the townhomes operated by Builders, and the board was looking for a larger agency they could join where their residents could receive the care needed to develop independent living.

Avenues Board of Directors along with his wife Peg O’Herron, Chair of the Board. During this time, he has seen his son Kevin become a part of the community. “He is so happy here.”

Jacki Kimel, a founding member of Builders of Skills who spent her career working as a special-needs educator, shares Bob Healy’s passion for Avenues. “Avenues was the place for us.” Like Bob Healy, Jacki Kimel is very much a part of the Avenues family, and continues to serve on our governing board. “It’s been very rewarding to see that in the 40 years since Builders started, including the 20 years as part of Avenues, the majority of folks are still getting good care and are in a very secure environment.”

Testimony to Avenues’ care and long-term commitment is that more than two-thirds of the original Builders residents are still participating and thriving in our program today.

Today, we celebrate the “right decision” Avenues’ board of directors made twenty years ago, and for “building” a commitment that will last a life-time.

On the cover: Connie Koshaba is shown working at Boston Market in 1997 as a participant in Job Placement Program, and today as part of the AveVenture Training Program at Avenues’ Thrift Shoppe.

Rengle Dansberry, a resident of Okazaki Family House, saved money from her paycheck to take her first trip to Florida, a life-long dream she was able to fulfill with the help of staff member Christina McCary.

“It’s a very tough decision for a parent to place a child in another home, but I knew from the moment I met Bob Okazaki, Avenues Executive Director, I was in the right place,” said Healy. “I was so impressed that he knew all the clients’ names, and other agencies we toured did not have that connection with the clients. Merging with Avenues was a perfect transition.”

That close connection between Avenues and Builders of Skills was also strengthened by the fact that many of the Builders’ residents, were already participants in Avenues’ Job Placement Program. Throughout the past 20 years Bob Healy has continued to support that connection with Avenues. Today, he serves on
From our Executive Director

Building community successes for 64 years.

In 1997, we welcomed the residents and families of Builders of Skills into the world of Avenues to Independence. They taught us about issues facing people with hearing impairments and intellectual disabilities. We expanded the scope of our services and as a result, Avenues became a better organization.

The main reason for bringing Builders in under the Avenues umbrella was to ensure the continued well-being of their 15 residents. Financial concerns brought them to us and Avenues offered a lifeline that would permit the Builders folks to remain in their residences and continue their lives without any disruptions.

However, a secondary consideration was also in play. Back then, I penned the first of many articles on the approach of managed care and how it would compel Avenues and other disability support providers to band together to compete in a new world where insurance companies and other cost cutters would attempt to limit important residential, day and employment services for individuals with disabilities.

Hospitals were in the midst of major mergers to compete with the health insurance industry. Insurers were looking to limit what they paid for medical care; doctors and hospitals were teaming up to increase patient numbers and loyalty in hopes of having the upper hand at bargaining time.

This was my premise for what was going to happen to Avenues. We were the free-standing “community” caretaker and it was time to scale up to meet the menace foreshadowed by managed care. Builders was the first step; in that same year, a deal with another organization that would have doubled the size of Avenues was also in the works. Good or bad, I had it in my mind that the bigger we could get, the better off we would be in the world of managed care.

Today, doctors are employees and mega-hospitals continue to look for ways to get bigger. However, in the disability field, residential, day and employment support services are still provided by smaller charitable organizations like Avenues. During the last 20 years, the incentives driving the medical industry had not become compelling enough to implement managed care in developmental disability services.

At Avenues, the second deal was doomed by plain old turf battles. Turned out ok as big was not needed to be better. We turned our attentions inward to make the Avenues/Builders union into the best organization possible for the people we serve.

Unfortunately, despite the lack of a formal managed care initiative, Illinois began to implement cost reductions on their own. Since 1997, cost-of-living has increased by 51%. Nationwide, per capita disability funding increases have almost matched this at 50%. Sadly, Illinois has failed to keep pace. Over the past 20 years, funding has only increased by 17%. Today, our state would have to double reimbursements for community based disability services just to reach the national average.

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This cost cutting has manifested into more than 62,000 Illinoisans with disabilities waiting for needed residential and other support services. Service organizations cannot pay competitive wages, many have staff vacancy rates of 25% and higher. Turnover within direct care positions often exceeds 50% per year. Individuals with disabilities cannot establish long-lasting relationships with their primary staff supporters. This results in more personal turmoil and disruption in people’s lives.

Given the current political climate in Illinois, it does not seem likely that a purposeful, long-term fix is likely. Senior, children’s, mental health, homelessness and countless other programs have closed or substantially reduced services.

Time to dust off the old crystal ball for another round of predictions.

1. Illinois will limp along with no real budget until after the 2018 gubernatorial election.

2. Small social service providers will continue to be stressed by the budget impasse and begin to merge (sounds familiar) in an attempt to survive.

3. Through acquisition or outright awarding of state contracts, for-profit service providers will garner a larger percentage of funding.

4. After a real budget is finally passed in 2019, the for-profit providers will be successful in obtaining an increase in overall funding, thus providing a decent return-on-investment to their stakeholders.

5. No matter what takes place in Washington D.C., Springfield or in the boardrooms of big-box human service companies, Avenues to Independence will continue to thrive as a community-based, locally known, successful provider of services for individuals with disabilities.

While numbers one to four can be debated, there is no doubt about prediction number five. During 2017, Avenues celebrates our 64th year of operations. We started in the basement of the First United Methodist Church of Park Ridge, solely supported by families and friends who cared about a future for people with disabilities. Today, we look to you and others to continue this legacy.

Our success will not be judged by mergers, big boxes or managed care. Avenues exists as a locally known organization doing good work in the community. Your concern and support allows this to happen. Individuals at Avenues living their lives with independence and dignity will be the ultimate arbiter of our success. With your help, this will be possible. Thank you.
An Evening at the Derby crosses the finish line as the most successful Love Affair ever!

The Kentucky Derby is often called the most exciting two minutes inports, and this year’s An Evening at the Derby followed that tradition. Avenue’s Derby was definitely exciting, proving to be the most successful Love Affair gala in Avenues’ history. More than $250,000 was raised to put Avenues in the Winner’s Circle.

Special thanks to our sponsors, donors, volunteers and the more than 250 guests who made Avenues the odds on favorite on February 18 at the Loews Hotel in Rosemont. We are extremely grateful to Clarence “Joe” Herbst, Love Affair’s major benefactor, and to the Louis and Harold Price Foundation for providing a $50,000 matching challenge.

Our Derby hats and “fascinators” go off to Love Affair chair Beth DiMeo, co-chair Molly Dietlin, and their 19 member committee for taking Avenues to a first place victory!

Proceeds from An Evening at the Derby will provide programs that bring fitness, education, and creative opportunities to the lives of the more than 200 people Avenues serves.
Allan Bartel –
2017 recipient of the Jane and Albert Wohlers Visionary Award

A very humbled and grateful Allan “Al” Bartel accepted the 6th annual Jane and Albert Wohlers Visionary Award at the Love Affair.

In a moving tribute to Al, Nancy Malik, daughter of the late Jane and Albert Wohlers, presented the award to Al. “The Visionary award was created in 2012 to honor my parents, and the award lives on to recognize those who truly understand and support the idea that everyone deserves to be a productive member of the community. Tonight we honor Al Bartel who has done just that and has been a visionary where Avenues is concerned for nearly three decades.”

Nancy further explained how Al’s dedication and volunteerism has made an enormous difference for the people of Avenues. “Even though Al has no family member that benefits from the services provided by Avenues, he has shown all of us how to disregard outdated stereotypes and envision the possibilities for Avenues’ participants each and every day. He inspires us all.”

As he accepted the award to a rousing standing ovation, Al stated that receiving the award “means so much to me because of the name Jane and Albert Wohlers. Albert was a friend and a mentor to me, and a major influence in my life. I am grateful to be part of this incredible organization, and I can only say this experience has been and continues to be an extraordinary one, and it’s one in which I have been the beneficiary of so much more than I have given.”

View more photos from Love Affair and a video of the Jane and Albert Wohlers Visionary Award presentation in the media gallery of our website.

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Foundations support our Programs

Avenues is thankful for the generous grants and corporate gifts received since our last publication.

For ergonomic chairs at the Work Center:
• Laughing Acres Family Foundation
• Sasser Family Foundation
• Employees Community Fund of Boeing

Thanks to our generous foundation support, all the participants at the Work Center, including Brendan Foley, perform their work in comfortable new chairs.
Irish eyes smile on the emerald anniversary of Irish – A Celtic jewel for 20 years!

Irish Fest is always a grand celebration, but this year was extra special. On March 12, more than 330 guests helped Avenues celebrate the 20th Emerald Anniversary of Irish Fest at the Cotillion Banquets in Palatine.

The generosity of our guests, along with gifts from our donors and sponsors, helped raise a record $65,000. Proceeds will enhance the lives of our participants through computer learning programs, healthy lifestyle programs, adaptive and accessibility items for our senior clients, and support for Avenues’ art program.

Since Peg O’Herron and Bob Healy first started Irish Fest 20 years ago as a small gathering in their home, the popular event has grown by leaps and leprechauns every year, and celebrates all that is Irish – food, music, singing, dancing and everything green. Since the very first gathering in 1997, Irish Fest has raised nearly $600,000 to support Avenues’ programs – a very lucky pot of gold!

We extend a very special thank you to our entertainers and volunteers who come back year after year and donate their artistic talents – the Irish Heritage Singers (14 years), the Weber Irish Dancers (13 years), photographer Ray Doud (8 years), harpist Marysue Redmann (7 years) and flutist Barbara Holland (4 years), and the Joyce Boys Band (4 years).

Irish Fest provides participants, such as Nora Prindiville who are also entrepreneurs, a chance to sell their handmade crafts at the Grafton Street Market. The lucky participants earned more than $200 for their creative crafts.

With deep appreciation to our Irish Fest co-chairs! From left, founders Bob Healy and Peg O’Herron. Joining the committee in 2010 were Joanne Doheny, Pat Grimes, and Peter Doheny; and Mary and Mike Prindiville have been contributing their talents since 2007.

Among the more than 30 Irish Fest supporters who have attended all 20 years are (from left) Theresa and Ray Walsh, and Joan Fargo.

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A trip to a library is not everyone’s idea of a good time, especially on a blustery February day. But don’t tell Cathy Trevor that. Cathy has always admired Harold Washington, Chicago’s 41st mayor, and the namesake of Chicago’s flagship library. When Katie Garrity, Cathy’s case manager learned about her keen interest in him, she offered to take Cathy to the library where Cathy eagerly learned about the former mayor.

Nearly $1,600 was raised by The Harp and Fiddle in Park Ridge to benefit Avenues on Fat Tuesday. Special thanks to owners Ed Berry and Declan Stapleton and Celebrity Chef Pat Brown for preparing a great four course Cajun dinner for more than 100 guests and Avenues’ supporters.

More than 75 of his closest friends and family members celebrated with George at his 90th birthday party at Sasser Family House on March 28. George was so happy to see all his friends, especially his former co-workers from Barnaby’s Pizza in Des Plaines. Shout outs to Avenues’ staff members Jessica Szewczyk, Lauren Kasprzyk and Deanna Osborn for planning this very special event for a very special man!
Celebrate with Avenues at these upcoming events!

**Annual Dinner and Dance**
June 16

**Avenues/Gorman Golf and Tennis Classic**
July 24

Visit our website at avensuestoindependence.org for more information and to register.

Special thanks to Joe Ropski of Palwaukee Printing for providing color printing of Avenews.