



The Arc Celebrates 50 Years – Thanks to our Community Support

By: Rebecca Deurlein

As The Arc of Fort Bend celebrates 50 years of serving individuals with special needs and their families, it's never been more apparent that the Fort Bend Community is one of a kind. From its inception to its current operations, The Arc was incorporated in 1968 and was developed through community support and effort, a self-sacrificing leadership team, and a passion for providing "quality of life" to *every* individual.

James Patterson's family was instrumental in getting the organization off the ground, perhaps because his interest was personal. James and his wife, Mary Jo, had given birth to their son, Joe David, born with Down Syndrome, at a time when special education services did not exist within the public school system. After visiting with parents who had lost their own child and who recommended contacting The Arc, James began attending support meetings that alternated between Smith Elementary School in LCISD and Lakeview Elementary School in FBISD. In his third year of attendance, he was asked to serve on The Arc Board of Directors, which partnered with Richmond State School to provide outreach to special needs families.

While the partnership worked well, the parent support group saw the value and promise in The Arc and wanted to support its mission, so they set out to bring together a team to raise money for services and resources for special needs families. They needed a van to transport clients, so they planned an oyster eating contest - based solely on the fact that all of the oysters would be donated. That contest raised \$15,000, twice what was needed to purchase a van and sparked a yearly event that gave The Arc prominence within the Fort Bend community. "On the second year of the Oyster Eating Contest, we added a few items auctioned off by a local TV personality. When that TV personality didn't show in the third year, Patterson was coerced into auctioning off the items, and the rest, as they say, is history," said Patterson.

Houston Oiler participation helped to draw crowds, and the event continued from 1976-1993, doubling profits each year for several years running. Since that time, the Oyster Eating Contest has evolved into the annual Golf Tournament, first held at Quail Valley, then Weston Lakes, and still held every June.

As The Arc began providing services the list of those wanting to participate grew, as did the need for sustainable income. A western dance was planned and implemented where again, everything was donated by Board members and community leaders. The dance was such a hit that it outgrew its initial location at Regal Ranch, moved to the Fort Bend County Fairgrounds, then to Fluor and finally, to the George Ranch Arena. The western dance is now known as the "Best in the West", one of the most popular and successful Fort Bend fundraisers held annually

on the Saturday before Thanksgiving. It continues to bring in outstanding profits with very few costs, thanks to the generosity of area schools, businesses, and individuals who not only donate to the event, but also serve on committees volunteering their time to make the event happen.

With fundraising resources, programs, and transportation in tact, The Arc saw an increase in Fort Bend County population and in special needs families seeking services. It became obvious that the organization needed a building. One visit to the George Foundation netted the group enough money to begin scouting land and building options. They needed a 15,000 square foot building and a bank loan, which they secured through the generosity of Keith Bowles at Puffer Sweiven. Keith provided his own signature on the bank note that allowed The Arc to build its first building – thanks to Gene Reed and others who donated supplies and services to construct a building, located at Hwy 6 and Glenn Lakes Dr. in Missouri City.

From there, The Arc formed a partnership with the Richmond State School, now known as Texana to provide day activities for adults with special needs. Eventually in 2006, The Arc moved its administrative office to its current location on Brooks Street in Sugar Land. It was then that Laura LaVigne was hired as Executive Director, bringing with her years of special education teaching experience, along with experience as a school administrator. "I enjoy working with an organization that accomplishes its goals by building community support around helping others. I am amazed and so thankful for the hundreds of volunteers who give their time and talent so that others will enjoy an improved quality of life," said LaVigne.

And those volunteers are absolutely necessary to the success of the organization. The Arc receives one small governmental grant that funds half of one program that they offer. Texas ranks 50th in the nation for funding community supports, so LaVigne is adamant about giving back to the local community that has made her organization what it is today. "We make our money in Fort Bend and spend our money in Fort Bend. Our budget goes entirely to improving the lives of people with disabilities."

Today, The Arc provides a variety of services including legislative, educational and client advocacy, recreational activities, Special Olympics, and housing for clients in group homes which are leased at below market value and maintained entirely by the organization. Patterson explained, "We go out and buy houses in neighborhoods where you would want to live and maintain them better than your neighbors. This is because of Laura LaVigne - she insists on those standards. As she says, if you wouldn't let your son or daughter live there, our clients won't live there."

High standards, financial responsibility, and problem-solving are the tenets upon which The Arc formed, grew, and served over all these years. Growth continues as The Arc serves individuals with intellectual and related developmental disabilities(including autism),raises funds for services and homes, and sends the message throughout the Fort Bend community that all individuals are worthy of respect and a good quality of life.