

HISTORY NOTE: ProAct celebrates 50 years of revolutionizing rehabilitation services



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Red Wing leaders had a vision in the late 1960s to bring a new nonprofit program to the historic rivertown that would serve individuals with disabilities with employment, training and life enrichment. Interstate Rehabilitation Center (IRC), which became ProAct, opened in September 1969. It celebrated 50 years of service at events this fall.

In 1968, Red Wing Jaycees and special education teacher Joel Steging began efforts to develop a “sheltered workshop.” William Ogren was hired as IRC’s first executive director, said Sally Ogren, director of ProAct in Red Wing. She is William Ogren’s wife.

In the spring of 1969, he raised money and scouted out locations for the fledgling agency. Red Wing Shoe Co., other businesses and United Fund, which later became the United Way, put up the needed funding.

IRC’s first home was in in the administrator’s house and laundry buildings of old City Hospital. Sally Ogren said IRC was initially seen as a way to save taxpayer dollars by serving individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities in Red Wing, rather than at an institution. The move toward community-based services was on.

People who wanted what IRC had to offer in its early days also needed places to live. Initially, foster homes were established. Area families rented rooms to participants.

By 1970, 32 individuals were served by the nonprofit and a system of boarding homes had been developed. Early participants came from Goodhue and Wabasha counties. Others came from the former state institution in Faribault.

IRC was growing, and soon moved to the Towerview campus for production space. It continued to produce aprons, wooden toys and other craft items near City Hospital. IRC also opened a downtown store to sell leather items, craft supplies and other products.

IRC served 60 participants by the summer of 1974. A 40,000 square-foot structure opened up in Red Wing's industrial park. "The location was a big factor, because we were performing work for other businesses and had capable individuals ready to work in the community," Ogren said. "Though there was opposition, the logic of the situation won out."



IRC purchased the building and moved in July 1975. After many expansions and upgrades, it continues to operate there.

In September 1976, a new executive director, Roger Stensland, came on board. IRC had four distinct work areas: packaging and assembly, a leather shop, wood shop and upholstery. A third of its participants were engaged in recreational activities, which included softball, Frisbee, horseshoes, basketball, bowling, bingo and library visits. Full-time staffers now numbered 20, serving 80 participants. Sick leave and vacation benefits were first offered in the following year.

Stensland also led efforts to build an addition that would house the Goodhue County DAC. It became a separate nonprofit. But as 1980 began, tragedy struck when Stensland died unexpectedly at the age of 42.

That same year IRC helped develop a new community education program for adults with disabilities and received a two-year certification from the Minnesota Division of Vocational Rehabilitation. In September, David Leiseth was hired as the third executive director. He would serve until his retirement in 2002.



The History Note is a monthly column sponsored by the Minnesota Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities, www.mnddc.org or www.mncdd.org and www.partnersinpolicymaking.com.