

Living interdependently Coastal Life

Coast Rehabilitation Services helps adults with developmental disabilities participate in the community

Story and photos by DWIGHT CASWELL

Perhaps you've seen them cleaning the windows of businesses from Seaside to Astoria, or you've shopped at the CRS Thrift Store at Seventh and Bond streets in Astoria, where they're on staff. Years ago these individuals would have been in sheltered workshops, never seen, and not a part of the larger community. They are adults with disabilities who are supported by CRS, Coast Rehabilitation Services.

Jake Carls is the executive director of CRS. His mission, and that of the nonprofit organization, is to help adults with disabilities discover how they want to live in the community and how to get where they want to be. The nonprofit does this by providing residential supports and services in group homes and private settings, as well as employment and day supports, such as work skill training.

"CRS envisions a world in which all people have the opportunity to participate in the community in which they choose to live," Carls says.

"They are people like anyone else," he says. "They have particular challenges, but who doesn't have challenges? People with developmental disabilities are people first, and the disability comes along as a secondary factor. Our staff gives them the support they need."

In the 1970s, Carls lived in the Southwest, working with court-committed Native American teens. "We were an alternative to federal prison," he says. Providing education and interpersonal skills, the goal was to help the teens decide where they wanted to be, as part of a community, and to help them get there. Carls soon found himself working with children — and then adults — with a variety of developmental disabilities. This eventually became his focus, and 10 years ago he came to CRS.



Photo by Dwight Caswell

Jake Carls is the executive director of Coast Rehabilitation Services, a nonprofit that supports adults with disabilities in the community.

Find more information about Coast Rehabilitation Services at www.coastrehab.org

In training sessions, Carls will ask new staff members what their interests and hobbies are, so that they're aware of the informed choices they've made in their lives. "Our people haven't had those opportunities," Carls tells them. Then he asks, "How do we give that to them?"

"It's a lot of work to make friends," says Carls, "especially if you are challenged in the area

of social skills." The paid staff of CRS help adults with disabilities learn how to make friends, so that if they go to a community event they can make long-standing relationships on their own. "We encourage social, recreational, employment and spiritual activities, which will lead to a life of their choosing," he says.

Contrary to what many believe, the developmentally dis-



Photo by Dwight Caswell

The Coast Rehabilitation Services Thrift Store in Astoria supports the nonprofit and accepts donations, including reusable furniture, clothing and other household items.

abled are treated by CRS, and by the law, as adult citizens in every way. They have the right to vote; they have the right to decide where to live and with whom. However, they may not have been exposed, as Carls says, "to the benefits or risks of particular activities or relationships." The role of CRS is not to decide what activities are appropriate, but to help these individuals understand the consequences of their actions.

Carls says, "When you ask them, 'what do you want in your life?' you have to be prepared for answers you might not like. But it's their life, not ours."

"The future looks different from what we have currently," Carls says, "especially in our schools. There is a focus on keeping families intact and people in the community." In the past the movement from institutions to group homes was necessary, he believes, but in

the future there will be a "move to living arrangements suited to them, with support."

The stereotype of developmentally disabled individuals is that they will always need 24/7 support. "That's not true," says Carls. "They can learn living skills." Not that they will live independently. "Is anyone truly independent?" he asks. "Who builds your car? Who makes your clothing? We want our people to be interdependent in the community." He leaves unsaid: like anyone else.

"Our people have been in the community since 1973," when CRS was founded, says Carls, "but I'm not yet certain that we

can say they are of the community. Our hope is that through community education, and our involvement in the community, our people will not only be accepted by the community, but that they will be missed when they're not there."

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