Community Advantage
New program serves retired consumers

Retirement years just got a little brighter for ACT consumers. They’re part of Community Advantage, a five-day-a-week activities program for ACT consumers.

“The driving idea behind it is that folks with developmental disabilities should be afforded the same privileges in their twilight years as a person without developmental disabilities,” says Ben Baker, supervisor of the program and Community Integration Supervisor.

The new program has been in place since January, 2009 and has about a dozen participants. As time goes on Baker hopes to increase participation among ACT’s programs.

“All of our consumers really love being in CA,” he adds. There are many benefits for participants, he says. One of the greatest benefits is they’re active and not just sitting at home after retirement. Another key benefit is the fact participants can be away from the Community Integration Program which has over 100 participants and can be hectic and loud.

“They enjoy the fact of knowing who they’re going to go out with and who their staff is going to be,” says Baker. “They get to pick what they want to do so there’s no anxiety for them.”

The participants are just a few keystrokes from a full day of activity. Two activities a day are listed for Monday through Friday on a Web site. Consumers just sign up in advance and head for a wide variety of activities from volunteering at the Food Pantry and Central Missouri Food Bank to bowling, having coffee or going to a museum.

Baker hopes to expand the roster to many more activities and eventually give consumers three activities to choose from each day.

The goal is to offer as many enriching activities to those retired individuals with developmental disabilities as those without disabilities.

“It’s a growing issue with our population at large—everybody,” says Baker.

There’s an increased number of baby boomers and increased quality of care,” he adds. “It’s hitting us from all angles. ACT always tries to be proactive and on the cutting edge of things and I think this is definitely a good start. It serves a growing population. We have lots of folks who will be qualifying in the next five years.”

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Ben Baker, Supervisor of Community Integration Program and Community Advantage Program
CT lost one of its greatest supporters and benefactors on December 7, 2009. Gerald, “Jerry”, Braznell passed away that day at the age of 78.

“Jerry Braznell was a very important person in the history of our organization,” says Executive Director Mark Hassemer. Because of Jerry’s son Bill’s involvement as an ACT consumer, Jerry served generously with the organization. He was one of five charter members on the Board of Directors when ACT was incorporated in 1975. He remained closely involved with ACT through the years and returned to the Board in 1999, serving through 2006. He was Board President in 2003-04.

Jerry was instrumental in establishing ACT’s ReachOut Fund, a fund for donations with the purpose of providing gifts and other resources to ACT consumers. Jerry bequeathed a significant gift to the ReachOut Fund upon his death.

“The donation, that’s what he wanted to do,” says his daughter Lynn Hedrick. “He always said, ‘don’t forget.’”

“He was very interested in helping the rights of the disabled,” she adds. He was particularly interested in early and elementary education for individuals with disabilities and started a program in St. Louis that at one time operated three facilities for individuals with disabilities.”

“He had a passion for people with disabilities and expressed that by serving on ACT’s Board as a Director. He had a great deal of respect for ACT’s Board and Executive Director Mark Hassemer.”

A successful businessman, Jerry spent 46 years as a well respected and honored leader in the printing ink industry, growing the family business, Braznell Co. as president and CEO. He went on to serve as CEO of Midland Color; CEO of INX International, a subsidiary of Japan-based Sakata INX; and president of Heritage Inks.

“Jerry showed, in addition to unbelievable success as a businessman, that he had a sensitivity that really balanced his life and made him different than almost anyone I have ever met,” adds Hassemer.

“I’ve worked with a lot of parents and family members over the years and it becomes personal for them because they have a family member who experiences a disability, a very significant one sometimes, but it went way beyond that for him. Jerry cared about people with disabilities and it’s evident with his 30-plus years of involvement with ACT. He helped start this organization and was on the Board many years later, and was active with raising money for ACT. That puts him in a pretty exceptional category.”

His generosity will continue, not only through his financial gift, but also the involvement of daughter Lynn Hedrick and son, Richard Braznell.

“I’m hoping to carry on my dad’s legacy and support ACT in any way that I can,” says Hedrick. “My brother, Richard, and I will continue to support ACT. It’s a tough legacy to carry on but we’ll do it.”

Jerry was preceded in death by Barbara, his wife of 54 years and brother Richard M. Braznell.

“Memorials & Donations
Thank you for your donations to the ReachOut Program, in memory of Gerald Braznell

Jean Smith
John and Maureen Riffle
John and Susan Murphy
Mrs. Thomas Hedrick
Mr. and Mrs. Frank Frost
Mr. and Mrs. James Murphy, Jr.
James and Elizabeth Kienker
Joann Conrad
George and Gloria Wilson
Roger and Mary Lou Keech
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Sunshine Committee of Valley Park Elementary School

We appreciate your recent donations
Peggy Payne
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Ted McClure
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Guy Schupp

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Executive Director Mark Hassemer
Twenty years ago ACT consumers Chris and Mila broke new ground by moving into their own ACT-supported home. Carrie Griffith, Community Living Program Manager, shares her observations about Mila and Chris and their move to independence two decades ago.

“Why not?” is Chris’ typical response to being told that something cannot be done. Chris learned from experience that questioning the norms is a necessary part of achieving success. Chris was part of a pioneering effort. When group homes, campuses and institutions were the extent of “forward thinking” in the area of residential placement for adults with developmental disabilities, the people who knew Chris and her soon to be roommate, Mila knew there had to be something more. For those who were not able to live alone, but were not well suited to a congregate living environment, there had to be a way to support people safely in the community while respecting them as individuals.

Chris and Mila were great candidates to pioneer the idea. Chris and Mila were very different from each other, yet complemented each other in unusual ways. Chris loved to listen to loud music—Mila, who happens to be deaf, didn’t mind that at all. Even as the two ladies prepared for the exciting transition, there were a lot of doubts, what ifs, and contingency planning. A lot of people were asking “How?”, “Why?” and Chris’ answer was “Why not?” Chris, an adamant self-advocate, was ready to “move out and live like a grown person.” Mila, had a loving supportive family who helped her to advocate for her own home. Neither had options where they currently were. To Chris it seemed simple: Other people grew up and moved out on their own. Could she do it? Well—why not?

Chris and Mila are examples of success for a variety of reasons. Both, while having very different support needs, are living as independently as they are able. These women have the confidence of people who have reached out and taken control of their lives.

With their support team firmly in place, Chris and Mila, ventured into this previously uncharted territory. They moved into a home in a well-established neighborhood. In line with the new philosophy of being part of the community, their home did not resemble a facility; there were not multiple people in a bedroom. Not only did Chris and Mila have their own room to decorate to their taste, but also they had an entire house! Not only did Chris and Mila have their own room to decorate to their taste, but also they had an entire house! Chris and Mila were like any roommates, they had their disagreements, there were compromises about who dusted and who washed dishes, and there were a lot of memories made. Mila and Chris stayed together, as roommates for almost 15 years.

In 2004, Chris, after much soul searching, decided that “it was nothing against Mila, she was a good roommate, but it’s just time to move on—time to get on with life.” Chris found two new roommates, as did Mila, with similar interests and began the search for new homes. As the pair went their separate ways, staff supported each as they prepared to move, as they made the physical move, and helped with some of the separation anxiety that happens when you stop living with someone after 15 years. Chris and Mila were great candidates to pioneer the idea. Chris and Mila were very different from each other, yet complemented each other in unusual ways. Chris loved to listen to loud music—Mila, who happens to be deaf, didn’t mind that at all.

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New responsibilities.

Kevin Wilson, right, has stepped up to the position of assistant warehouse coordinator after 10 years of work with ACT including serving on the cleaning crew. He goes over his day’s plans with John Savage, Director of the Employment Services Program.

One of ACT’s newest employees is also a former consumer of ACT’s services. Kevin Wilson, the new warehouse assistant, has been involved with ACT for about 10 years, six of the most recent years as a production worker in the warehouse. In addition, Kevin also worked as a member of the ACT cleaning crew for two years.

Kevin has always been dedicated to ACT. “I have always loved this place – ever since day one when I walked into it,” he says. “This job gives you everything you want.”

In fact, Kevin loves ACT so much that he wanted to be married to his now-wife, Erin, in the ACT work area. To this date, they remain the only couple married at ACT.

John Savage, Director of Employment Services, hired Kevin because of his experience and dedication. “We are very excited to have him come on in this capacity,” says Savage. “He’s really jumped into the role and is doing well with the new duties and responsibilities.”

In every job, Kevin works at increasing his skills. He currently is working to master the software used in shipping. With a firm knowledge of his job duties in the warehouse and with delivery and pick-up, he’s also making suggestions about how to improve warehouse operations.

“I’m the number one contender of all things,” he says confidently. “I can do every trick of every trade there is to do. I can do just about anything that needs to be done in this warehouse.”

Working from 12:30 p.m. to 5:30 p.m., five days a week, Kevin says he “loves the hours. I wouldn’t have it any other way. I’m still working on it and giving ideas,” he adds.

“I’ve got the skills to be a professional and I have fun doing it,” he says. “I love working with all the people. They’re all really good people.”

And confirming Kevin’s success, Savage adds, “We’re very pleased. It shows we made the right decision when we hired him. Kevin’s transition from being an ACT consumer to becoming an ACT employee has been a good thing.”

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Kevin Wilson, ACT warehouse assistant

Since Mila “sees” her world through touch and smell, swimming is one of the highlights of her week.

Mila enjoys evening walks with her roommates around her neighborhood.

Mila loves to be outside and feel and smell “nature.”

Chris helped to choose her home, it was important to have a large bedroom so that Chris could display her collections. Chris likes to show her home off, and is an excellent host.

She loves music and spending time with friends, going for ice cream or for a walk at Shelter Gardens. Chris takes a lot of pride in her journey and her home—and she looks forward to what’s coming around the corner. When she has an idea, and someone tells her it can’t be done—Chris just smiles and says “Why not?”

Mila recently moved to a beautiful new home in Columbia. One of the perks of the new home is a jetted tub in the master bath. Mila uses the jetted tub several times a week and staff can see the look of content while she is lounging in the tub. Since Mila “sees” her world through touch and smell, swimming is one of the highlights of her week. Mila uses the local recreational facility to go swimming a few times a month. Mila enjoys evening walks with her roommates around her neighborhood. Mila loves to be outside and feel and smell “nature.” She spends some nice evenings on the deck hanging out with her roommates and those who support her.

Chris helped to choose her home, it was important to have a large bedroom so that Chris could display her collections. Chris likes to show her home off, and is an excellent host. She looks forward to her “IHOP” meeting each year. It is truly a celebration of past successes and a tool for planning future successes. Each year, Chris has grown in her interests and her goals.

Chris often announces what she wants with a great candor. She went to Six Flags to ride the Batman Returns ride. She was “Appetized” (baptized) and enjoys church.

ACT consumer becomes ACT employee

Love for ACT drives new warehouse assistant
Contacts are key

Career Services Program boosts networking

The tough job market is helping ACT Career Services to sharpen its job placement skills. Career Services’ efforts have evolved recently to focus primarily on two related ideas—establishing close relationships with local businesses through existing personal networks, and developing a thorough knowledge of those businesses’ employment needs.

Recently the Career Services program began encouraging ACT employees to provide information about contacts they might have at local businesses in order to assist with finding placement opportunities for job seekers.

“Finding employment opportunities all starts with networks,” says John Savage, Director of Employment Services. “When you have that established relationship to tap into, it makes it much easier to talk to businesses about the services we provide.”

Jessica Boffa, Program Manager of ACT Career Services, adds that ACT employees “are all here to support the same mission. One of the areas where we are asking for help to support that mission is for all ACT staff to think about their personal and professional networks and the people they know. If they share that information with us, Career Services staff can talk to those businesses about the services we offer and about the recruitment and retention support we can provide.”

Utilizing ACT Career Services can be a benefit for employers because ACT can help filter job applicants. Career Services’ job developers work with a business to understand their employment needs and the skills and abilities of successful employees. Career Services staff can then review their pool of job seekers to recommend qualified applicants.

“It’s an employer’s market right now,” says Savage.

“Employers have to weed through many applications to find qualified applicants. ACT Career Services makes it easier for them, because we will only provide qualified job seekers. And ACT will then provide on-the-job support for candidates who are hired.”

The strength of ACT’s placement efforts lies in “relationships and networks,” says Savage. “It’s certainly true with the people we’ve assisted with finding jobs. It helps to have that relationship to draw the interest of the business manager. Every applicant has skills that they bring to the table. So why should a manager choose one qualified candidate over another? They rely on the trust they have with the person or agency that referred the candidate.”

To encourage employees to provide employer contacts, ACT is considering providing incentives to employees who provide contact information which results in a job placement. Anyone wishing to provide business referrals should contact Jessica Boffa or John Savage at ACT Career Services. “We assist people with seeking employment in many different fields, so any contact recommendations are welcome,” says Savage. “The reality is that the more people that we talk to, the more doors that are going to be opened,” says Boffa. “The more people we’re talking to, the more opportunities there are for the individuals ACT is supporting — the more we further our mission.”

The strength of the placement effort lies in “relationships and networks.” It’s certainly true with the people we’ve assisted in finding jobs. There has to be a relationship to draw the interest of that manager. Everybody has skills that they bring to the table but why should I choose a particular person. It’s relationships.

Jessica Boffa, ACT Career Services Director

Many ACT employees took advantage of a free health fair this spring. Lots of healthy information, including blood pressure checks, were part of the fair. Here Dennis Collier, Maintenance Supervisor, checks his blood pressure with Cory Prasch who represented the Columbia-Boone County Department of Health and Human Services.
Meet Ben Baker

New supervisor for two programs

Working with consumers is the best part of Ben Baker’s job. A new Supervisor of the Community Integration Program and Community Advantage Program says relationships with consumers “are the most rewarding things about the job. I really enjoy interacting with consumers and making sure they’re benefiting from our services.”

Baker, whose wife Shauna also works in the Community Integration Program, was introduced to work with the developmentally disabled as an English major at Westminster College, Fulton. There he worked at the Missouri School for the Deaf. “It introduced me to the population,” he explains.

He and his wife also sharpen their professional skills as foster parents of a 15-year-old girl, who the couple plans to adopt soon. Baker adds that he’d like to have two more foster children in the near future.

“If I’m going to spend my time doing something it might as well be something positive,” he says, “benefiting other people. Of course I feel good about it so I get a benefit out of it too.”

As for his role at ACT, Baker says his goal is to increase the number of consumers in the Community Integration Program. He’d also like bolstering the new Community Advantage Program.

“I think ACT does really well anyway,” he says. “ACT expands and grows and changes the way they do things if they can find a better way to provide services. We never really say we won’t serve somebody. We find a way to benefit anyone we possibly can.”

If I’m going to spend my time doing something it might as well be something positive, benefiting other people. Of course I feel good about it so I get a benefit out of it too.

Ben Baker, Community Integration Program and Community Advantage Program Supervisor

Interaction is key.

For Ben Baker getting involved with ACT’s many consumers gives him deep satisfaction. Ben serves as the new Supervisor of the Community Integration Program and Community Advantage.