

Becoming Independent

1425 Corporate Center Parkway • Santa Rosa • 524-6600 • www.becomingindependent.org

Providing the path to independence

The seed of Becoming Independent (BI) was planted over 40 years ago. “There were no offerings for graduating students of special education [going] into the adult world,” says Cami Weaver, CEO of the non-profit that promotes community inclusion and participation for people with developmental disabilities.

In the 1960s, a group of parents and their loved ones organized the first community-based adult program in Sonoma County. Today, BI is the largest provider, serving 1,300 individuals.

Disabled people, says Cami, “have the same hopes and desires as we do: to get a job, meet a girl or meet a guy and go off into the sunset, to make a difference in the world.” BI provides that stepping stone for leading an independent life.

“The State is our primary source of funding,” says Cami. In the face of state budget cuts, BI emphasizes grass-roots advocacy. “One of the ways to become independent,” notes Cami, “is to find your voice. Many of the folks that we serve are adults and they vote, and they vote loudly.” Occasional pizza parties provide extra incentive for letter-writing campaigns.

Political engagement also means lobbying by BI leadership in Sacramento. Last July, BI staged a rally at the Santa Rosa state building with 300 people. “We met with Wes Chesbro and Noreen Evans,” Cami said. The staff didn’t speak, “but our people did... about losing dental coverage [and more]. It was pretty compelling.”

BI has carefully managed expenses, especially since the rate of funding it receives hasn’t changed since 1991. For the current fiscal year, BI lost seven percent of that funding, about \$1.2 million. “We were on top of it, and saw it coming,” Cami said.

The facility’s heating, cooling and water efficiencies have been improved, and Cami is collaborating on a 20-year plan for the campus because, as Cami notes, “this is our precious commodity.” Management has also endured voluntary pay cuts for about a year, which allows main-line staffing pay to remain stable.

Right now, Cami says, “BI’s numbers are good... I want to take full advantage of these tough times, because we’re really skilled at that. BI is great at taking a little bit of something and making it magical. That’s what we do best.”



Kevin Nuñez makes his way through an activity tube at the Becoming Independent Family Center’s playroom.

BI serves three counties: Sonoma, Napa and Solano, with the bulk of clients here in Sonoma County. The BI campus is comprised of two buildings, a fleet of 70 vehicles, and a newly established garden. The buildings house administration, resource centers, jobs training, education and arts programs. There are two satel-

lite workshops in Healdsburg and the city of Sonoma.

BI partners with Agilent Technologies, Food Maxx and other companies to provide jobs on or off site. Participants learn how to landscape, stock inventory and assemble products. And it’s not all about work; BI provides social activities and



Cami Weaver, CEO, is a 19-year veteran of Becoming Independent.

trips, from local weekly get-togethers to special destinations like Disneyland or Hawaii.

Continuing education activities and classes range from recreation to job training—even a driver training course. There is a computer lab and a fitness center. “We’re part of iWalk, we have yoga and Qigong classes, and every morning we have a campus-wide wellness exercise session,” Cami says. A visitor will note that Cami is on a first name basis with every person she comes across on the BI campus.

Painting, sculpture and jewelry flourish in the BI ArtWorks program. The halls of both buildings are hung with dozens of pieces and some artists have attracted dedicated collectors. The public can see these works when the gallery opens again in June of this year.

In addition to all these programs, BI is currently responding to an emerging request from the community at large to spread its continuum of services to children with disabilities. The same critical need that special education grads face also exists for children under five with disabilities such as autism.

It’s a gap which BI intends to fill. “Parents are reading that early intervention is key to get your kid on track,” says Cami, “But there’s nothing out there for them.” BI will serve these children and continue serving them through their adult lives.

“It is a new day for BI,” says Cami.