

PathPoint will honor outstanding success story

Organization helps disadvantaged, disabled with life



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When Deanna Elwell discovered PathPoint in 2005, she communicated largely through physical aggression, outbursts and self-injury. She wore a helmet to protect herself from her own actions.

Today, the Santa Maria woman holds down a job, takes art classes and exercises regularly at a local gym. The helmet is long gone.

"A lot of the work we've done is helping her learn to identify her own feelings and learning how to communicate," said Alana Walczak, PathPoint director for Santa Barbara County. "She's done so well we hired her to work for us part time. She's really transitioned."

On Saturday, Nov. 15, Elwell will be among three honorees at PathPoint's 50th anniversary celebration from 2 to 5 p.m. at the Santa Maria Country Club.

The public is invited to the event, which also serves as a fundraiser for the local nonprofit organization.

Tickets are \$30 and include a hosted reception, silent and live auctions and the award presentations. Pianist and PathPoint participant Bernard "Bernie" DeBoer will provide live music.

Other honorees will include Dr. Philip Ente, a Lompoc neurologist, and Joe Sanguinet of Los Olivos. Both had family members who participated in PathPoint programs and have gone on to support the nonprofit in leadership roles.

Sanguinet has served as a board member since 2011. Ente is an outspoken supporter of PathPoint and an advocate for people with neurological injuries.

PathPoint, then known as Work Training Programs Inc., was established in Santa Barbara in 1964 to provide comprehensive training and support services that empowered people with disabilities or disadvantages to live and work as valued members of their communities.

The program is largely funded through government programs, but about 25 percent of its funding comes from private donations, grants and foundations, Walczak said.

Today, PathPoint provides independent living, community access, employment, residential and behavioral health services to more than 2,000 people within San Luis Obispo, Santa Barbara, Ventura, Kern and Los Angeles counties.

The program serves individuals with such physical and developmental disabilities as autism, cerebral palsy and Down syndrome and those with such psychiatric disabilities as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder and anxiety disorder.

It also serves people who are disadvantaged — low-income seniors, the homeless and at-risk foster youth transitioning to independence.

"We believe all individuals, especially those with disabilities or disadvantages, can achieve self-sufficiency and dignity when the proper supports are in place," Walczak said.

In Northern Santa Barbara County, those support services include providing some 200 individuals each year with opportunities to explore vocational interests, develop job and life skills and, ultimately, live as independently as possible.

That may include finding gainful employment, volunteering in the community and even advocating for their own needs while living independently.

"I like it," Elwell said. "I like the staff. I'm comfortable. They help me out. They supervise me. Having a job makes me feel good."

Senior support is unique to the agency, Walczak said. The program provides low-income seniors age 55 and older with job training skills to help them re-enter the workplace.

"There's a lot of hidden challenges for seniors that I didn't realize," said Martha Lopez of Santa Maria.

After retiring from a job with Santa Barbara County, Lopez found herself in need of another job to help make ends meet.

But her self-confidence began to crumble as application after application was turned down.

"You become intimidated and insecure," she said. "Along with learning new skills, I've had to learn a new mindset."

Lopez began working with PathPoint to develop new job, technology and interview skills.

"Seniors are certainly capable of learning the technology," she said. "We're not really afraid of it, but we become intimidated because sometimes employers assume we don't know it and aren't able to learn it."

"There's also the mindset that seniors are set in their ways and aren't trainable," she continued. "Seniors also have the idea that our experience is worth something, that we're worth more than employers are willing to pay.

"It's a different world, and PathPoint has really helped me to understand that," she said.

Through PathPoint's Life Learning Center and Life Independence Center programs, individuals are encouraged to take an active role in their growth and advancement in personal life, social, academic and prevocational skills.

The programs encourage and support individuals to have safe and positive experiences with their surroundings and the people they encounter.

Volunteer services include delivering lunches for Meals on Wheels or the Senior Nutrition Program, participating in Adopt-a-Park, community gardening and volunteering with animal shelters, Foodbank of Santa Barbara County and the YMCA.

In addition, individuals participate in ceramics classes, book club and such prevocational classes as dressing for success, resume writing, and mock job interviews.

In recent years, many individuals have found success in increased communication skills or self-esteem levels leading to personal growth as they volunteer in the day program or the community.

"We aren't just serving the individual with the disability; we're serving the family, the community at large, the employers," Walczak said. "It ripples."

For more information about PathPoint, visit www.pathpoint.org.

'Spotlight' series

From Avila Beach to Gaviota Pass, 1,255 nonprofit organizations are registered with the state of California, and that doesn't include hundreds of additional homeowners associations of various descriptions.

Santa Maria Valley is home to nearly 500 of those nonprofit groups. This is the next in an occasional series highlighting such programs that benefit our communities.