

Providence Center celebrates its 50th anniversary Thursday

By Ben Weathers

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The pride is evident when Richard Austin of Pasadena shows off his ceramic pots emblazoned with a signature Maryland blue crab.



By Laura-Chase McGehee — Maryland Gazette

Terry Lynn Hill concentrates on cleaning off a tool to smooth out the flower-shaped platter she made. Hill is just one of more than 500 men and women benefiting from the Providence Center's programs which prepares developmentally disabled individuals with lifelong skills for real life work environments.

For the past five years, Austin, who is mentally disabled, has earned a wage creating ceramics at the Providence Center's pottery workshop in Arnold. Last year, equipped with the skills he learned as part of the program, Austin, 47, was able to land a second job washing cars and taking out trash at Annapolis Volvo.

"This is the stuff I do for a living," Austin said. "This is my pride and joy."

Austin, who's known as "Mr. Richard" around the workshop, is a prime example for the Providence Center's mission, executive director Chuck Coble said.

"We believe everyone has a gift," Coble said. "Life that's not challenged is just not worth living."

For half a century, the Providence Center has helped thousands of local residents who are mentally disabled to find their own gifts. The center will celebrate its 50th anniversary at a ceremony this Thursday evening at the Chartwell Country Club in Severna Park.

As Austin worked on his ceramic pot this week, some two dozen other adults worked to mold hunks of clay into vases, bowls and ornaments.

Peggy Miles of Freetown kneads clay into a mold making it resemble a turtle's shell. Peter McArdle of Waldorf works with the end product — a plate with turtles seeming to crawl around the ceramic edge.

David Fowler, 60, who moved to Arnold in 2005 from Glen Burnie, helps wax ornaments to commemorate the center's anniversary. Like Austin, Fowler also was able to use the skills he learned at the center's workshop to find a second job.

Fowler works at the National Electronics Museum in Linthicum where he helps to stock papers, he said. Fowler enjoys the interaction with the center's other clients and staff, he said.

"I like it here — the people are nice, everybody's friendly," he said.

The Providence Center was founded in 1961 in Annapolis as the result of several families and local educators who sought educational opportunities for children with mental disabilities rather than institutionalizing them.

The center was the first day care center exclusively for the mentally disabled in the state. At first it provided services to only about a half dozen children.

With the passage of the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in 1975, the center shifted its focus from children to adults.

The center now has five buildings throughout the county, including activity centers in Arnold, Severna Park and Millersville, as well as its administrative offices in Glen Burnie.

There are now some 500 mentally disabled adults who participate in a number of programs the center provides.

In addition to the pottery studio, the center also offers a wood shop, a horticultural greenhouse gardening program and a comprehensive arts institute.

The products that the center's participants create are sold to a number of local retailers including Whole Foods of Annapolis and Homestead Gardens.

While the Providence Center has made tremendous strides over the past 50 years, the challenges that the mentally disabled face continue, Coble said.

"Still today, unfortunately, there's a lot of stigma attached to the disabled," Coble said.

Coble and the rest of the center's officials are hoping to combat that stigma by further integrating the mentally disabled into their communities.

"We're going to get more and more out in the community. We look to garner even more public support," Coble said.

Community support has become even more important to the center's mission as public funding has decreased in recent years, Audra Harrison, a spokeswoman for the center said.

The desires of the disabled are not that different from those of anybody else. Many want a meaningful job, personal relationships and their own home and independence, Coble said.

In addition to providing medical care and psychological services, the center also provides transportation to and from programs, as well as other jobs the center's clients might have.

For the family members of the clients, the services that the center offers are important.

Laura Wiegmann of Pasadena has a 22-year-old daughter who participates in the center's program. The program helps Wiegmann's daughter, who doesn't communicate verbally, express herself creatively, she said.

"They go out their way to meet her needs. She's always happy when she's there," Weigmann said.

Mike Szuba, 61, of Pasadena, said the center has helped his younger brother, Robert, 43, who works at the center's wood shop, gain a sense of self.

"It gives Robert a sense of pride — that he's able to be an asset to his family and his community," Szuba said.

Szuba's younger brother has been attending the center's programs since he was 3 years old.

"The center has been a godsend."

Thursday's ceremony will begin at 7 p.m. It will be preceded by a cocktail hour at 6 p.m.

bweathers@mdgazette.com