Arc of Iowa History Project

The Arc of Iowa is an advocacy organization that was founded in the early 1950’s and at one time had representation in all 99 counties across Iowa. At its time of creation, individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities were kept at home, locked up in institutions, not allowed in schools and over all had no human rights.

Caregivers and loved ones of those with disabilities formed the Association for Retarded Citizens later renamed as The Arc. Together they formed a national movement that advocated for basic health rights, enrollment in schools, the closure of harmful institutions and accessibility to jobs programs today.

Iowa has a rich history of advocating for individuals with disabilities and our very own Senator Harkin was part of a national movement to create the American’s with Disabilities Act (ADA). The ADA is piece of legislation that dramatically improved the lives of those with intellectual and developmental disabilities and has given rights and opportunities to families for decades to come. The Arc of Iowa and its local chapters would like to recognize this history as Iowa played such a critical role in the creation of this act. We would like to partner with the Harkin Institute in any way that we can to support this champion of disabilities and offer historical insight into his efforts.

We began The Arc of Iowa history project this year. As members of the executive committee travelled to various chapters we found great enthusiasm for developing a history project. Some chapters had already started. Many had significant files that just need to be coordinated and developed into a display. Each person we spoke with helped further define possible approaches.

As we discussed this it became obvious that there is a very rich history that needs to be preserved and time is of the essence. Many of our leaders from the past are in their 80’s and 90’s. Passing along the culture and principals of this great organization to the next generation is critical. We have considered a permanent display that a committee would update regularly and also a smaller travelling display that we could take to chapter meetings around the state. We even believe that the stories that are coming out could possibly result in a book detailing the amazing history of Iowa as a leader in the support of disabled citizens.

At this time we are attempting to get each chapter to develop what they would like for their area. We then would hope to develop the state organizations approach with the help of individuals from each chapter.

The following is a brief explanation of our progress to date:

Arc of Marshall County (Marshalltown)

Materials have been gathered and the coordination and development phase is progressing. An agreement has been made with the Marshall County Historical Society to store and maintain the completed display and with the Marshalltown Public Library to display the completed work during Disability Awareness Month.

Arc of East Central Iowa (Cedar Rapids)

We have the beginning of committee being formed. A very large amount of materials exist in the Arc facility and many former volunteers and staff members have offered materials they possess. Cedar Rapids has a monthly luncheon for former staff and volunteers. Last meeting we unveiled the program and found a treasure trove of information and a great deal of enthusiasm.

Arc of Southeast Central Iowa (Iowa City)

The chapter has transitioned to a younger leadership group and is working to reach out to previous board members that might have materials and an interest in this project.

Arc of Cedar Valley (Waterloo)

The board began a history project a few years back but it did not get finished. They are trying to assemble the same committee to restart the program. The state wide interest has motivated them to restart their effort.

Arc of Story County (Ames)

Work is underway to assign a chairman and committee for this chapter.

Arc of Jefferson County(Fairfield)

Material is accumulated and is being developed into a presentation. We have a committee formed and the work is in process.

Arc of Wayne County (Corydon)

A chairman has been recruited and additional committee members are being contacted. They have a lot of material and a very rich history in Wayne County.

Arc of Tama County(Tama)

Arc of Woodbury County(Sioux City)

Arc of Winnshiek County(Decorah)

Arc of Delaware County(Manchester)

Arc of Cedar County(Tipton)

Arc of Henry County(New London)