

Willows Way continues mission of empowering individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities

By Alexandra Ray

Everyone has the right of choice. But for some, it may be more challenging to exercise that right. Willows Way, a nonprofit organization located in St. Charles, works with adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities to empower them to exercise their right to choose and to encourage human connection.

Willows Way was established in April 1990. Co-founders Kathy Williamson and Mary Owens saw a need for bringing services to individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities and were determined to meet that need. Bringing services to the individual rather than having the individual seek out those services themselves was, at the time, a new concept in the state of Missouri.

Joy Steele, Executive Director of Willows Way, explained, "At that point, that was really relatively new and unique to think that somebody with a developmental disability has the capacity and the right to be able to choose where they want to live, and we have stood behind that value from our inception."

Today, Willows Way continues to provide services to adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities through various programs. RISE (Reaching Independence through Social Engagement) is a program that allows clients to participate in daily community activities.

These programs give Willows Way clients the power to choose. The RISE program is no exception.

Steele stated, "The thing that makes the RISE program really unique and what made it stand out from some of the other programs in the area was the fact that it's built on sort of half and half. (The participants in the RISE program) spend half their time here on site, half their time off site. And it's about constructing a meaningful day... the day is not prescribed to them... the day is very fluid for them and it is about choice."

When the participants in the RISE program are off site, Steele explained, "A big component of what they do off site is volunteerism... (they) go and volunteer their time at these other non-profits and they get a lot of benefit from that, and there's a lot of empowerment that comes along with that. As opposed to being the recipient of goodwill from the community, they're actually able to return that, and that's hugely empowering."

"I like to volunteer," shared Emily S., a client of Willows Way who participates in the RISE program. "I like the pet adoption. You clean windows... and you get to feed the dogs treats."

One of Emily's favorite things about Willows Way is "going out places like in the community that I don't get to do at home." She said, "(Willows Way is) a place where I get to see my friends and do fun stuff."

While choice is a core value at Willows Way, so is human connection. This includes the connection of the community within Willows Way as well as their connection to the outside community.



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Steele stated, "I would challenge you. Do you have somebody in your life that has a developmental disability that you hang out with? ... It's hard. We get so busy and wrapped up in our own lives that it's really hard to remember that even for most of us we're not necessarily reaching out, but wondering why they don't feel included in their community. Well, it's (because) I don't know that the community is doing enough to really reach out."

One of the opportunities the community has to participate in Willows Way is at their annual event, Art of Wine, a gallery show where the artwork of Willows Way clients is displayed and sold. 100 percent of sales go to the artists. Steele shared, "The look on their faces, especially when they sell a piece of art, they just light up, but when they sell out it's amazing, absolutely amazing." Steele said, "It's a really fun way for people to connect because all of the artists are there, and so it's kind of a nice way for people in the community to connect. Not only (are they) buying this amazing piece of art but (they) connect to the artist that created it too, and always have that story that goes with it."

Steele said, "At the end of the day, you ask me why we're here, the answer is to make their life better in whatever way that is. If I can't say that we've made their life better, then I don't think that we've done what we're supposed to do."

To learn more about Willows Way and the programs they offer, or for more information concerning Art of Wine and to learn of other ways to become involved, visit the website at www.willows-way.org or call 636-947-6591.

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