

A WALK THROUGH HISTORY IN THE BEGINNING

BY: MARY PIROSKO



Mary and Stephen Pirosko

My son, Stephen, began attending programs specifically designed for children with severe disabilities when he was four years old and lived in Cheyenne, Wyoming. He continued to attend a similar program when we moved to Illinois in 1964. The program was administered by the Proviso Association for Retarded Citizens, now known simply as PARC. My first goal when my family arrived in Hammond in June of 1972 was to find a program for Stephen. It proved to be a real challenge. At this time, there was only one program in existence in Tangipahoa Parish, a class held in a trailer next to St. Joseph's School in Ponchatoula. The class was not suitable for Stephen because it was designed for children with milder disabilities.

When I first began making inquiries about services, I was told that none were needed because children like mine were all at the Hammond State School. I inquired at the state school about a day program for Stephen, but was told that it was strictly a residential facility. Stephen was thirteen at this time, and we wanted him to continue to live at home with his brother and sister.

I joined the Tangipahoa ARC and asked for help in organizing a program. I was encouraged to pursue my efforts. I contacted the State Office of Mental Retardation and was told that they could not help me. After repeated visits and requests, they told me that if I could find a place to hold a program, find the children who needed those services, find the teachers for that program, and operate it successfully for one year, they would consider making funds available. I accepted that challenge.

At that time, I began working as associate editor for a weekly newspaper, The Sun, and became very familiar with parish and city leaders. I talked about the program constantly and took advice from local residents who had worked with governmental agencies.

My husband, Joseph, and I decided on a course of action.

We took Stephen with us to a meeting of the Hammond Commission Council which consisted of Mayor Sam Saik, Streets Commissioner Conrad Anderson, and Finance Commissioner John Cosner.



Mary, Stephen, and Joseph Pirosko

They allocated \$2500 for the proposed program. Commissioner Anderson also approached a well-known local banker, Buddy Billups, who was a patron of the Hammond State School, and he also donated \$2500.

I then approached the Tangipahoa Parish Police Jury. Juror Rube Rogers, who had a niece with disabilities, requested that the Jury approve an allocation of \$2500. That brought the total funds donated to \$7500, a considerable amount in 1973.

Stephen's former teacher in Illinois, Ellen Wright, had just married Barry Meyer. Meyer had been president of the Proviso Township Youth ARC, had taught a class of adults with disabilities, and had served with me on the Board of Directors for the Proviso ARC. I contacted them and asked them to come to Hammond, Louisiana and operate a program for Stephen and others who had severe disabilities.



Barry and Ellen Meyer

They came in July for an interview with a committee from TARC consisting of myself, Milburn and Hazel Fletcher, Joe DeMarco, and Shirley Vitter. The interview took place at the old Hammond Cafe on Thomas Street. The committee agreed to hire them, and they moved down in August. The Fletchers helped them find a house to rent in Ponchatoula.

Local realtor Katie Wainwright suggested I contact the First Methodist Church which was then located in downtown Hammond in a building which now houses Hammond City offices. Charles McKaskle, president of the Methodist Men's Club, agreed to allow us to use one of their classrooms at no cost. However, the classroom was still used every Sunday for Sunday School, so every Friday afternoon the TARC classroom was transformed into a Sunday School class and then back into a TARC classroom on Monday mornings.

The word went out in The Sun newspaper that a day program was being started for children with disabilities in the community. Barry, Ellen, and I passed out flyers in grocery store parking lots asking that people with children needing services call me. Within a short time, Barry and Ellen had interviewed the parents of five additional students.

I went back to Otto Estes, Director of the Office of Mental Retardation, and told him that I had seven thousand and five hundred dollars, two teachers, a location, and six students. He agreed to contract with the Tangipahoa ARC to fund the program at \$1000 per month. The president of TARC at that time was Joe DeMarco, I was Vice President, and DeMarco asked me to sign the contract as a representative of TARC. I did.



Stephen & Joseph Piroosko

The first class opened in September 1973 with six students ranging in age from six to twenty-six. Families of children in need of services continued to apply as knowledge of the program spread. In January, another class opened in the Methodist Church, creating a class for young children and another for youth and adults. Two individuals were hired as assistants. Jean Cobb became Barry's assistant and Ronnie Bean was Ellen's.

Some parents were able to bring their children to the TARC Center, but I had been providing transportation for three students, besides Stephen, and the need for a permanent form of transportation became obvious. We petitioned the Hammond United Way for funds, and a utility van was purchased, but without seats or windows. Barry found a supplier and Joseph arranged for the Louisiana National Guard to install them. Barry drove the bus until we could afford to hire a bus driver.



Stephen Piroosko and Barry Meyer

The original contract with the State Office of Mental Retardation was for just nine months. We knew that people with disabilities required year-round services, so a grant was obtained to provide a summer day camp (including swimming at Zemurray Park) for the program participants and other individuals from the Hammond area.

The TARC Board of Directors supported the effort to initiate services for people with disabilities in the community from the beginning, cheering on my efforts and providing valuable contacts. Many of the members of TARC had children in residential programs in New Orleans or at the Hammond State School but never hesitated to support the need for a local program in Tangipahoa Parish. TARC support validated my efforts and provided the official endorsement required to contract with the state and to obtain additional local support.

In the beginning, the classroom had only tables and chairs. Although Barry and Ellen made most of the materials for instruction, supplies were required. Initially, no curriculum for people with severe disabilities existed, so Barry and Ellen made their own.

Individualized therapeutic instruction was offered with parental input. A wide range of instruction was provided – including personal care, such as feeding and dressing; hygiene, such as hand washing, bathing and dental care; small and large motor & physical skills; communication and language; personal safety, socialization, behavior control, and basic academics. Music was always an important part of the program. A small record player was purchased, and Ellen played her flute for the children. Older students worked on skills that might eventually make employment a possibility.

The overarching goal was for all participants to be given an opportunity to develop the skills and abilities necessary to be included in their family and community and benefit from all the options available to them.

The Sun Newspaper continued to publish articles about the program which increased public awareness. Extra funds were always needed. The Knights of Columbus was one of the earliest organizations to donate funds. KC members, Barry, Ellen, and members of TARC stood on street corners handing out tootsie rolls to those who would donate as they drove by as part of the KC's Annual Tootsie Roll Drive. Later, the KC's helped with TARC's first major fundraiser, a Las Vegas night held at the KC hall. Barry and I made presentations to Rotary and Kiwanis groups throughout the parish, and these groups also donated to the program.



Kathy Verret, Cleo Arnold, Dorothy Triplett, Gail Gregoire, Rob Albright, and Ronald Dykes



Ellen Meyer and Tammy Haggard

Local legislators such as State Representative Dennis Hebert and Senator Bill Dykes also provided support ranging from setting up personal meetings with Governor Edwin Edwards and legislative leaders to helping us paint ceilings in some classrooms.

As word spread throughout the Parish, demand for services grew, and in the Amite area, a third classroom was established at the Amite Baptist Church. The classroom was offered by the Church at no cost – just as those in Hammond were. Also, like the classrooms in the Methodist Church, the room served double duty and was transformed from a TARC classroom to a Sunday School class and back every weekend. With three classes, the State provided funds for Barry to become Lead Teacher.

The TARC "school," as it was called, added another class at the Methodist Church in Hammond in the Fall of 1976. And finally, a fifth and later a sixth class in the First Christian Church in Hammond. Some parents were hesitant to send their children outside the home, so Barry, Ellen, and other staff visited those children regularly and worked with the parents to establish home programs. At this stage of growth, the State contract was increased to allow Barry to become the first Director of TARC.

Throughout the course of this dramatic growth, the contract with the State was expanded to provide for the additional numbers of students, staff, and transportation. Also, the contract grew from nine months to ten and later twelve months of services. In the second or third year of operation, the Hammond State School began to work with TARC to provide some services such as testing and dental care.



Ellen Meyer works with the children at TARC on their fine motor skills

The undeniable need for services for school age children became increasingly obvious. – not only in Tangipahoa Parish but also throughout Louisiana and the rest of the United States. Strong parent advocacy efforts at the national level, led by The Arc US, resulted in the passage of Public Law 94-142 in 1975 and later the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requiring free and appropriate public school education and ancillary services be provided to ALL school age children.

The Louisiana Act 378 was written by State Representative Lillian Walker. Walker, who had a son with disabilities, and her secretary, Carrie Saia, established and continued to work closely with the state ARC.



Eunice Kennedy Shriver, Stephen Piroosko, and Barry Meyer 1976 Louisiana Special Olympics at Southeastern Louisiana University

Public awareness about people with disabilities was increased when the state office of the Louisiana Special Olympics was located in the Hammond area in the early 1970's. Emanuel Bourgeois was the Executive Director.

Implementation of IDEA in the Tangipahoa Parish Schools provided several challenges and was often met with resistance, resulting in segregated classes for special education students. Progress was slow, but it was achieved. This change resulted in a significant shift in the provision of services provided by TARC as well as the agency leadership.

As more and more school age children were enrolled in public school classes, TARC shifted its focus to meet the needs of very young children through early intervention and adults with disabilities over 21 years old. TARC also strengthened its legislative and governmental advocacy efforts for all children and adults with developmental disabilities.

The decreasing number of school age children at TARC resulted in fewer classes. Consequently, a program Director was no longer needed. Barry moved on to The Arc Baton Rouge in 1978 as Director of Adult Services and became Executive Director in 1998. Ellen remained at TARC for an additional year and then went to the Early Intervention Program at The Arc Baton Rouge before becoming a Montessori teacher.

On December 1, 1979, Sylvia Bush was hired as the second Executive Director for TARC. She oversaw the division of TARC into two separate agencies in 1990. Sylvia continued as OPTIONS CEO until 2021.

The provision of services by TARC to meet the educational and therapeutic needs of children like Stephen and the many others who had no choice and had no voice would not have happened without unrelenting advocacy.

The early beginnings of acceptance in the Tangi community was with the support of the TARC Board, who as parents of children with intellectual and developmental disabilities, felt the need for greater inclusion of all children like Stephen. It was their collective understanding of that heartfelt need that was shared with other members of the community – family members, friends, churches and church goers, organizations, elected and appointed office holders, and the business community.

All who came to understand that need, helped TARC along the way. This community support and acceptance has continued to grow throughout 50 years.



Today, Stephen lives in an OPTIONS community home with a few of his friends. He receives 24/7 care from OPTIONS caregivers and nursing staff. Barry, Ellen and his mother still spend time with him.



Mary and Stephen Piroosko



Ellen Meyer, Stephen Piroosko, and Barry Meyer