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He chose a life of helping others live as they choose

BY CARMEN JURI THE STAR-LEDGER

For 30 years, Sidney Blanchard's mission has been unwavering: to move developmentally disabled people from institutions to independent living.

And he's been doing it one person at a time.

In 1979, Blanchard founded the



Union County nonprofit organization Community Access Unlimited in Elizabeth. In the first year he operated from the trunk of his Volkswagen Beetle with a \$90,000 grant and moved 20 adults with developmental disabilities from state institutions into the community.

Since then, his organization has enabled more than 7,000 people with disabilities, in addition to at-risk youth, to live independently or semiindependently.

"We don't believe in institutions or group homes," said Blanchard, 60, Community Access's executive director. "It's not what people have in a community as a norm."

Growing up in the 1960s era of heightened social awareness had a great influence on Blanchard. Helping those less fortunate in society has always been second nature to him, he said. It's what led him eventually to help people who are disabled.

"I'm a guy from the 1960s," he said simply.

Today, the organization provides support to 3,500 people with all kinds of disabilities, helping them to find jobs and housing, learn independent skills and manage their money. Blanchard said residents make up 10 percent of his staff.

Adelaide Daskam, who resided in foster care and institutions until she was 22, has been living on her own and working as a secretary at Community Access for the past 25 years.

"To me, living at an institution was no good," said Daskam, who has a cognitive disability. "I want to live to see my brothers and sisters living in institutions having freedom instead of being locked up."

Blanchard began as a one-man operation and would personally assist each resident through the transition from institutional to independent living.

"Often, I'd get sleeping bags and move in with them to help them settle in," he said.

Today, in addition to 55,000 square feet of commercial space, Community Access owns more than 200 units of housing throughout Union County and has a staff of 500. Its budget is \$20 million. In 1984, the organization added programs for youth in the welfare system.

Blanchard said the group's successes barely scratch the surface. New Jersey ranks in the top five states with a high number of institutionalized disabled people, he said. Some 3,000 residents still live in developmental centers.

"It's an archaic living arrangement," he said.

It is also an expensive option, according to Blanchard, who said the annual cost of supporting each resident is about \$225,000, or two to three times the average cost of community living.

The cost of providing community housing for his organization's members runs just \$20,00 to \$80,000 annually, he said.

Community Access Unlimited was one of the first nonprofit agencies in the nation to see the federal low-income housing tax credit as an opportunity to acquire property to be used for community housing for its members, said Joanne Oppelt, the group's development director.

"We do everything from soup to nuts," Oppelt said. "Employment assistance, advocacy, respite services, anything it would take to support someone in the community with a disability."

Blanchard began his career working for the state Division of Mental Retardation, now called the Division of Developmental Disabilities. He belonged to the State Employee Association union, which later organized into the Communications Workers of America, where

he became president of the association's Local Chapter 4.

But he felt he was not fulfilling his life's calling.

"I started catching myself thinking like a bureaucrat. That's not what my life is about," he said.

He saw an ad that advocated starting your own nonprofit group. Then the wheels began turning, and he decided to focus on getting disabled people out of institutions.

"This was unheard of back then," he said. "People with disabilities are in institutions."

Blanchard quit his job and obtained a grant from the national office of the Association for Advancement of the Mentally Handicapped. That group now is known as the Association for Advancement of Mental Health.

Community Access' latest inroads have been to enable disabled people to purchase their own units through a program called "A Home of Their Own," Oppelt said. Clients who meet the criteria can convert their rental subsidies to home ownership, and the organization takes out a second mortgage.

"We hold an equity position in the property," Oppelt said.

Mark Straka, 62, was able to purchase his own apartment two years ago through the program.

"I wanted to be like my brother and sister, own my own place," said Straka, who has a learning disability and also works at Community Access, directing visitors to parking spaces.

Blanchard is proud of cases like Straka's, but he cautions that a lot more needs to be done. He said thousands more disabled citizens deserve to live freely in society.

"We don't want to build a handicap village. We want people to have real lives, where the Welcome Wagon lady is happy to go and call," he said.

