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The 50th anniversary gathering for The Arc of Indian River County, below, included music and fun for the clients, their families, and friends.



PHILANTHROPY

The Arc's Triumph

HELPING DISABLED NEIGHBORS IN NEED EXPRESSES A SPECIAL KIND OF LOVE



BY JEFFREY R. PICKERING

The first track on Willie Nelson's 77th solo studio album is named "What Kind of Love." The 92-year-old troubadour recorded the song along with eleven others written or co-written by fellow Texan Rodney Crowell. The vocal recording showcases a familiar twang that is accompanied by bright ivory chimes,

a rich pedal steel vibrato, and driving boom-chick backbeat that will draw and hold the attention of even the most casual listener. Depending on whom you may be thinking about while this song plays, it will either bring a smile to your face or a tear to your eye. Performed by The Arc of Indian River County's choir, it is guar-

anteed to deliver both.

What kind of love does it take to make people with special needs and the families that care for them feel like they belong in our community? The kind of love that was on full display at The Arc's 50th anniversary celebration earlier this year as the organization's house choir belted

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out its heartfelt renditions of Kenny Rogers' "Through the Years," Dolly Parton's "I Will Always Love You," and a plucky version of *Golden Girls* sitcom theme song "Thank You for Being a Friend." Sitting next to The Arc's founder and longtime benefactor, Mary Ellen Replogle, and looking out across the crowd of friends, family members, volunteers, and financial supporters gathered underneath a new outdoor pavilion, I felt like I belonged there too.

Fifty years ago, it was a mother's love for a son with Down syndrome that inspired Mary Ellen, along with several caring members of the Vero Beach community, to come



Mary Graves with Mike and Leslie Swan

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together and establish The Arc. A supportive network of friends, family members, and caregivers, as well as the special needs Wabasso School, helped her to raise her son, John, while operating her family's restaurant, the Ocean Grill. As John became an adult, however, Mary Ellen



Executive director Heather Dales with Arc founder Mary Ellen Replogle

recognized the need for more programs to help him and others like him to gain greater independence. Since then, The Arc has helped thousands of people just like John while giving family members peace of mind that their loved ones will be okay.

According to the Florida Department of Health, approximately 16 percent of Indian River County's population lives with a disability. At least 200 people with more severe and marked conditions such as Down syndrome, cerebral palsy, autism, and other developmental and traumatic brain disabilities are served by The Arc of Indian River County each year.

With an annual operating

budget of approximately \$4 million, The Arc and its team of 75 employees operate six residential group homes that provide 24-hour supervised programs to teach the skills disabled adults must know to live independently. The organization also provides adult training, behavioral services, supportive employment, and transportation services. Unlike most Indian River County charities, whose income is from contributions, the majority of The Arc's program services are paid by government funding sources such as Medicaid.

In return, aging parents of The Arc's clients are given the peace of mind that their loved ones will be supported to live safe, healthy, and happy lives. The occasional country music sing-alongs are a bonus—something that makes Mary Ellen smile as she celebrates her own 100th birthday this year.

If the Replogle family's story is one that exemplifies a community's belief that people with various forms of debilitating conditions belong here, what kind of love does it take to make the programs and services offered by The Arc available to anyone who needs them, regardless of ability to pay? A recent referral from local attorney Michael Swan gave me a crystal-clear example.

As one of the founding attorneys of Rossway, Swan, Tierney, Barry, and Oliver, Mike Swan practices in the areas of guardianship, estate

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planning, mental health, and probate and trust administration. He maintains a statewide practice handling complicated guardianship and mental health matters, often to ensure the health and well-being of adults with disabilities whose parents have passed away. This was the type of plan he'd established for Derek Heath through a special needs trust set up to benefit his son, Richard. Sadly, this plan changed when Richard passed away suddenly in February at the age of 46.

Using funds from the special needs trust that would have supported Richard throughout his life, Derek established the Richard Heath Memorial Fund at Indian River Community

Foundation to benefit The Arc of Indian River County. This permanent endowment will make an annual distribution to The Arc to help pay for programs and services for others who do not have financial resources of their own. Derek hopes this will inspire others to do the same.

"Despite Richard's special needs, he was a very accomplished young man," Derek told me. "He achieved the rank of Eagle Scout, and he also represented the United States golf team in the Special Olympics in Athens, where he won a gold medal."

"Whether practicing his swing at the Vero Beach Country Club or attending classes



The Arc serves over 200 individuals with special needs each year.

and working at The Arc, Richard felt like a part of this community. He would be happy to help others. He'd love it."

What kind of love? Mary Ellen knows. Derek knows. Willie knows, too.

The kind that sees neighbors with special needs and never turns them down. The kind that lifts the most fragile members of our community off the ground. The kind that, if you let it, can turn your life around. 🌱

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