

BUSINESS PROFILE

Roger Bradley champions the freedoms we take for granted

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Roger Bradley might be described as a freedom fighter. But not freedom as in a high-minded philosophy or ideal. He fights for flesh-and-blood people who struggle with common freedoms we take for granted, such as using a telephone or the ability to form relationships.

Mr. Bradley is in his 23rd year as executive director of LARC Inc., a non-profit agency in Lee County that helps people who are described by phrases like “mentally retarded” or, more recently, “developmentally disabled.”

“It all has a derogatory connotation, but it’s very descriptive,” Mr. Bradley said as he strolled through LARC’s main campus last week, on the corner of Fowler Street and Evans Avenue in Fort Myers. LARC’s clients go there daily for programs or to work. Some of them have been going for decades. The agency was formed in 1954.

Mr. Bradley, 57, is a tall and well-known presence there, like a school principal. Many of the long-time clients know him well and he chats with them while visiting the classrooms.

“This is the way the community cares for people with developmental disabilities,” he said. “It’s through this agency.”

LARC serves about 225 people throughout its system at any given time. There is another location in Bonita Springs and group homes throughout Lee County.

The state offers funding for the developmentally disabled to use LARC through Medicaid, because caring for them in

a year-round institution is much more expensive. It’s also less humane.

“It’s stifling and regimented,” Mr. Bradley said. “People telling you what to do every moment. You sort of don’t even have authority over your own life.”

If a developmentally disabled person or his or her family chooses the Medicaid Home and Community Based Waiver, it costs LARC an average of \$26,000 per year to care for the client, rather than \$118,000 to place the person in an institution. LARC’s yearly budget is \$2.8 million, down from \$3.1 million in 2006 due to state budget cuts.

The ultimate goal is to create a sense, for the disabled, that they have some control over their own lives.

“Just to meet friends, to have a place to live where you have an opportunity to go to the mall and interact with real people in real situations,” Mr. Bradley said.

The developmentally disabled have a wide range of abilities and issues. Some have to be fed with gastric tubes. Some with cerebral palsy have to be massaged regularly so their muscles don’t cramp up.

Many continue coming to LARC every day, where there are special classrooms and programs. There is also a woodworking operation, where students use specially designed equipment to produce wooden stakes for companies that contract with LARC, like Embarq.

In most cases, there are 10 LARC students to one staff member. For the most severely disabled, the staffing is one on one.



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Roger Bradley

Others are able to live on their own with help. There are programs to place them in jobs doing janitorial or cleaning work for the city of Bonita Springs, bagging groceries at Publix or in government jobs.

“We fade out of their lives, but never completely,” Mr. Bradley said. “We fade out to the point where everything’s kosher, but less (involvement) would cause problems.”

Their individual needs are, like anyone’s, both unique and common.

“They don’t know how to react, what to do in any given situation,” Mr. Bradley said. “They are anxious. Their lives can be disrupted very easily. One thing we provide here at LARC, that I’m really proud of, is we’re here day after day and we have been

for 55 years. We offer continuity and familiarity to people — and that’s a comfort.”

The organization is aided by partnerships with United Way and the Lee County Department of Human Services.

“I have to give the county a lot of credit,” Mr. Bradley said. “Quality wise, it is essential to what we do. It distinguishes us and the services we provide from others in this state.”

Mr. Bradley grew up in Fort Myers in a family of four brothers and two sisters. His grandparents moved to Lee County in the 1940s and his father, a surgeon, moved the family to Fort Myers in 1952. Mr. Bradley has a wife and three children.

He was a Little League coach for many years and also loves to go sailing.

Mr. Bradley’s sister, who is developmentally disabled, is one of the biggest reasons he chose to work for LARC. She was one of the school’s first students and is still there on a daily basis.

“She’s incredibly athletic,” he said. “She’s 52, and still in better shape than half the people getting out of college. She used to jump on a trampoline for hours on end. She could hit free throws nine out of 10 times.”

It was in college at Florida State University when Mr. Bradley made the decision to work for the developmentally disabled. He switched his major from philosophy to special education.

“A lot of those questions that philosophers debate can’t be answered,” he said. “So, (I thought) why don’t I do something practical? What programmatically can be done is the question, in the here and now. That’s real.” ■

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