

The Arc, Upper Valley 2018 Annual Report

Good evening fellow advocates, champions of compassion, purveyors of justice, educators of truth, creators of change. We are here tonight because we all share a common passion. We all believe that every person, regardless of ability, should be able to actively participate as full citizens of the community. And generally, people with disabilities do live, work and play in the community of their choice, and in the home of their choice, working and going to school just like their peers. But regardless of the strides we have made at The Arc over the past 63 years, there is still much work to be done to ensure that we continue to propel our movement forward, fighting for the equity and fair treatment of all people.

You came here tonight as one person with one voice, but collectively our voices are louder and stronger and can be heard from further away. Together, we have the power to change the world and make a difference for future generations. For you to be a part of the change that we seek in Grand Forks and North Dakota, we need you to understand our story. And it isn't really one story, but many stories woven together to form a tapestry. So tonight, we are throwing out the numbers and outcomes and boring statistical reports, and instead sharing a few stories that will give you a sense of what we have done over the past year and how our work impacts the community.

Many of the requests that we get for support are for educational advocacy. I have permission from a parent to share her child's story. Any identifying information has been omitted to protect anonymity of both the student and the school district involved. In early 2018 a young student, who has a history of trauma in addition to having a disability, was involved in an incident at school involving school staff. The incident resulted in a new trauma that made her fearful to attend school. Several different agencies were involved throughout the spring. The mother of this student asked The Arc to help advocate for her daughter when she and the school could not come to a consensus about helping her transition back into school or accessing educational support outside of school. It took almost three months of meetings and many attempts of having her try to attend school before this student's IEP was updated to allow her to receive instruction outside of the school for the remainder of the year. The student had the option to attend specials, i.e. music, PE, etc., as she felt comfortable, so she could socialize with her peers. And other supports were put into place to help her work through her trauma. I am happy to report that she remains in the same school district but attends school in a different building this year and is having a very successful year in school. And we continue to check in with the family to make sure things are going well.

Some advocacy is very individualized like the aforementioned story, but other individual advocacy becomes a systems issue that must be addressed. A family contacted The Arc because their son was approved for the autism waiver which would allow them to access some much-needed services and in-home supports; however, they are unable to use the service because there is not a provider available to provide the required case management which includes mandatory home visits twice a year. At first, we thought it was because this family lived in a rural setting, but it turns out that regardless of location, there are 14 fully approved children across the state who cannot access autism waiver services for the same reason, providers are not accepting any new cases. The ND Autism Unit continues to search for new providers who can serve these families. This is compounded by the fact that the Autism Task Force is recommending more slots be added during the legislative session to serve additional children. So, it is vital that we advocate for not just these additional waiver slots but also figure out the practical aspect of serving existing children who have already qualified as well as any new children.

Just as individuals and families need us to advocate for their specific needs, we need self-advocates to reciprocate and help us fight the good fight. It takes a multitude of voices working together to advocate for the rights of individuals who have disabilities. Because we want to strengthen our voice across North Dakota, The Arc chapters across the state are working together to encourage people to be part of the change. And that is why we are inviting everyone to #countmeforchange. You met Breanna Foy tonight at the beginning of the evening. She is a seasoned self-advocate who believes, and I quote that “everyone, no matter who you are, boy or girl, has a voice and everyone deserves to be heard and get respect.”

Every single story that you share, or that we can share on your behalf, puts a face to the problems that we are trying to solve in Grand Forks, in North Dakota and across our country. Personal stories create imagery that is powerful and that can compel community leaders and decision makers to do the right thing for these individuals. That is why we need individuals to join us in telling the stories of North Dakotans, especially as we enter the 2019 legislative session. We need individuals and families to tell our legislators why people should live in the community and not at the Life Skills and Transition Center. We need individuals and families to come together to tell legislators what is and is not working in providing care for individuals with the new payment system. We need families, like the ones who are working so hard in Fargo, to talk about the importance of students being educated in schools with their peers and not in a different setting. We need families to tell how their children have been victims of seclusion and restraint in schools. We need individuals and families to speak about the importance of competitive wages and benefits for people working in the disability field because these staff are taking care of our most precious citizens; and therefore, we need to adequately compensate those staff. We are counting on each of you to help us create change. As President Barack Obama once said, “change will not come if we wait for some other person, or if we wait for some other time. We are the ones we have been waiting for.

I hope that being here tonight and hearing about the work of our organization has compelled you to be more involved with The Arc in Grand Forks as well as in North Dakota. If you are feeling inspired to be a part of the change across North Dakota, I encourage you to look at our website and Facebook page. We are present in many places across social media, but our Arc website and Facebook pages are the best place to get up to date legislative information, read the latest disability news, find out about current events, and read impactful stories of people in Grand Forks who are aspiring to great things.

One of the inspiring things that you will see on The Arc’s Facebook page, took place in September, and that was our first Wings for All event. Event participants were able to practice their traveling skills by standing in line and getting tickets, going through TSA, waiting in the gate area and experiencing what it is like to sit on a plane as well as exploring the entire cabin and cockpit. Not only did this event help to reduce barriers to travel for people with disabilities, but it allowed airport and airline staff to learn and problem solve how to help individuals who might need extra support when travelling. One family, whose son had only ever taken emergency medical flights and had a fear of airplanes for obvious reasons, was able to practice getting on an airplane before taking his Make-A-Wish trip this fall. He and around 90 other individuals were able to attend this event free of charge thanks to many partners. One partner we would like to thank tonight is The North Dakota Association for the Disabled, who awarded The Arc with a generous grant, that made Wings for All possible.

There are so many stories that we could share that have shaped our year. Stories about the individuals we serve. Stories about the families we have supported. Stories about the agencies we have

worked with. Stories about the employees who make our agency so great. Stories about community partners who help us do the good work of our organization. There is one community partner that is currently doing a project for our organization that I would like to thank tonight. The UND Nonprofit Leadership Student Association chose our nonprofit as their fall project. They are currently updating the look of our store downtown, with new paint, some redecorating, and some rebranding. This project will hopefully make our business more appealing to customers, which in turn will help us employ individuals with disabilities and help to fund our programming.

The success of our organization and the good work that we do, is because of the individuals who are directly involved with the day-to-day operations of The Arc. The board of directors have been working hard to bring our mission to life in the community. You will be seeing many amazing things coming your way in 2019 and beyond thanks to the passion and commitment of the board. You have already met the board of directors, but I would like to recognize them one more time. Would all the board members please stand?

As you heard in the Treasurer's Report, our volunteers contribute a lot of in-kind service to our organization. Our volunteers help us in so many ways, from cleaning and organizing, to providing administrative support, to reviewing human rights plans and behavior intervention plans. Our volunteers bring a wealth of time and talent to our organization that is so important to our success. Would all our volunteers please stand and be recognized?

And of course, we have our dedicated staff, who do the work of The Arc. Our employees are the backbone of this organization. They are all hard-working, dedicated and incredible team-players. I truly cannot thank them enough for everything they do. It definitely takes a village and I believe our village is the best in Grand Forks and North Dakota. Would our staff please stand up and be recognized?

Now I would like to thank all of you, fellow advocates, champions of compassion, purveyors of justice, educators of truth, creators of change. You came here tonight because you believe that all people should live together as citizens of our world without limits. You came here tonight because you want us to create a better future for everyone around us and for future generations. You came here tonight because you want to "raise your voice for honesty and truth and compassion against injustice and lying and greed. Because, as Faulkner said, "if all people all over the world would do this, it would change the earth." You came here tonight to be a part of a great movement in North Dakota, #countmeforchange.

Rachel A. Hafner
Executive Director