

## Chapter Five: Navigating the 1990s- New Agreements and New Programs

1990

### Happy Hearts Students Search for Litter in Lake Shore Park



*Lynda Perry, a Happy Hearts School Teacher, holds the bag for Curtis Lee who deposits a beer can he found while cleaning up Lake Shore Park. Photo by Carl E. Feather of the Ashtabula Star Beacon. May 19, 1990*

More than forty Happy Hearts School students braved blustery winds and cold temperatures early on a Friday May morning to pick up litter in Lake Shore Park.

Cindy Philips, Daily Living Skills Teacher, developed the community service project, and the Lakeshore Park clean up is its final phase. She said she did the project with the four classes of advanced students at Happy Hearts to show them how they can contribute to the community and that they too, could make a difference. "Everyone always does something for Happy Hearts," she said, and she wanted to help students give

back.

With the help of teachers and volunteers, the students ranging in age from 16-22, fine-tooth-combed Lake Shore Park for litter. They searched bushes, trees, paths, and playgrounds for paper and trash, stowing it away in bags that grew too heavy for the strong winds to snatch. Cindy said that the teachers and volunteers had planned a picnic to finish the project, but they had to reschedule it at the school because of the frigid weather.

The students started their Community Service project last March by donating \$300 that they had earned by cooking and selling lunch to the school staff to the American Red Cross. Other parts of the Community Service Project have involved cooking a meal for the Exchange Club and holding an Easter Egg hunt for the preschool. Cindy said completing different projects "teaches

them to be responsible and shows them that they have purpose and benefit to the community,” Phillips said.

As the students worked through these community projects, they also developed a different attitude toward giving. Cindy said when they first began earning money they wanted to keep it. As they completed projects, they wanted to know who needed donations. “They’ve really developed an awareness that the money is not just there for them,” Cindy said.

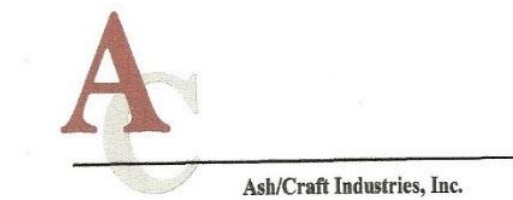


*Brrr! Cold winds blowing off Lake Erie Friday morning necessitated warm clothes, even blankets, for Jenny Richardson and other students participating in the project. Carl Feather took the photos for the Ashtabula Star Beacon.*



*Curtis Lee keeps trash from blowing in the fierce wind swooping in like the airborne gull from Lake Erie.*

## Ash/Craft for All Seasons



The Ashtabula County Sentinel of August 2, 1990 featured profiles of Ashtabula County Industries, including Ash/Craft Industries, Ashtabula County's Sheltered Workshop. Ash/Craft worked with well-established companies and incoming businesses helping them solve their work problems while providing jobs for special needs workers. Some of the jobs the workers at Ash/Craft perform include all types of packaging and assembly work, commercial sewing work, woodworking, silk screening, bulk and promotional mailing and catalog collating. As well as industrial jobs, Ash/Craft operates a greenhouse that offers seasonal and silk flowers, houseplants and garden plants on a wholesale and retail basis.

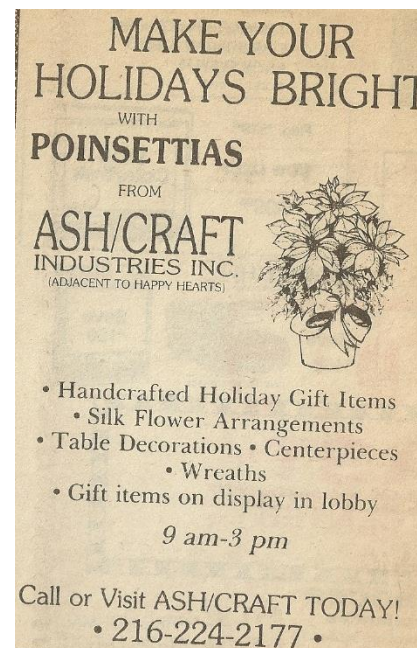
Ash/Craft was located in Happy Hearts School until 1978, when it moved to a new facility on Green Road, north of Happy Hearts. By 1984, Ash/Craft had found it necessary to begin work on an addition, doubling the square footage of the Workshop to approximately 45,000 square feet, including the greenhouse. The Workshop moved into its new quarters in 1985.

At the time it moved to its new quarters in 1978, Ash/Craft had 75 workers, but that number had more than doubled by August 1990. Workers are picked up in the same bus runs as Happy Hearts School.

## Ashtabula County Mental Retardation/Developmental Disabilities Board Reflects Budget Changes

In a December 2, 1990 story, Ashtabula County Sentinel Staff Writer John A. Childress wrote that Richard J. Cozza, Jr., Superintendent of the Ashtabula County Board of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities, reported that the Board would enter 1991 with a new set of responsibilities that its budget had to reflect. "It used to be all we had to worry about was how we would run our school and workshop programs," he said. "The state is requiring us to become more responsible for what services the clients get, their housing, and a host of other items we've not had to consider before."

According to Superintendent Cozza, the 1991 budget must reflect changes in the law as well as needs to be met. The November 1990 passage of a 0.5 mill operating levy that will generate about \$450,000 will make it easier to enact the budget. The changes in the law



include new staff levels, including ten additional bus aides, an early childhood level teacher, two early childhood classroom aides, and a transportation clerical employee.

In addition, the levy funds will be used to make specific capital improvements of about \$250,00 over a three-year period. Superintendent Cozza said the Board plans to spend about \$75,000 per year on these improvements. He also cited several changes for 1991. These changes include:

- Changing the program's fiscal department to conform with the Commission for Accreditation of Rehabilitation Services Committee. This national program will allow the board to access additional funding under contract with the Ohio Rehabilitation Services Committee, but will require an additional fiscal director for the Board.
- Identifying, creating, overseeing and monitoring about \$250,000 of supported living services during 1991. These funds will be for services outside of the Board's existing framework. Additional clerical workers may be needed to handle these funds.
- Targeting a Case Management Program designed to bring a potential \$87,000 in Medicaid reimbursements. However, workers will be needed to provide back-up documentation which cannot occur without reorganization. A typist to handle some needs will be hired in 1991.
- The 1991 budget does not include funding for summer school services for three-to-21-year olds because the school will be undergoing capital improvements and expanded responsibility of public school and state responsibility for extended year services as required under current state law. Superintendent Cozza said the board could provide such services on its own, but this will take away any reason for school districts or the State Department of Education to address the issue. Parents are to be referred to the school districts for these programs because the Board receives no additional funding for school programs beyond 180 days per year.
- Increasing responsibilities for adult client payroll and reporting requirements for CARF and Medicaid. Ten thousand dollars has been earmarked for this position.
- Appointing a committee to deal with developmentally disabled persons to meet state law requirements.

Superintendent Cozza projects that the anticipated revenues for 1991 will be slightly more than \$4.7 million dollars. This includes \$2.9 million from tax levies; \$544,400 from the state Department of MRDD; \$819,050 from the State Department of Education; \$363,950 from federal programs; and \$37,000 from other revenue.

1991

## Touting Totes for Safety



*Rena Hudson, Ash/Craft employee, sews a tote bag with the “Hands Up for Bus Safety” logo on it while Happy Hearts advanced class students Walter Kightlinger of Conneaut and Mary Shannon of Geneva hold the finished tote bag. Ashtabula Star Beacon photo by Nancy Erikson.*

May 25, 1991

Happy Hearts pupils and Ash/Craft Industries workers created safety problems when they carried many personal possessions to school and work with them and cluttered the bus aisles.

To solve this problem, bus driver Cheryl Lutes and bus aid Verna Osburn submitted the idea of making tote bags with the bus safety logo on them to the School Bus Safety Program Committee. Passengers could use the tote bags to carry their possessions so they wouldn't clutter up the aisles.

The Committee liked the idea and Ash/Craft sewing group employees began making the bags. Using the theme “Bus Safety: It's in the Bag,” the Workshop made the bags available to students, clients, and staff to purchase.

Linda Porcello, MR/DD Board Transportation Coordinator, said although bus safety week is in October, the clients and students observe bus safety day the first Wednesday of every month. On bus safety day, bus personnel reinforce safety rules, including the five basic bus safety rules which are:

- Be quiet at railroad crossings.
- Sit down when the bus is moving.
- Look three ways before crossing the street.
- Keep the aisles clear.
- Keep good behavior.

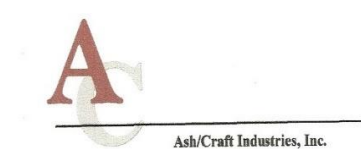
“I am very proud of our passengers, because once they know the rules they make sure that their fellow passengers enforce them. They are very good with these rules and I'm very proud of

them. The general population does not know that our population can learn and does,” Transportation Director Porcello said.

Bus safety doesn't only apply to passengers, it also applies to motorists who according to state law must stop 10 feet away from a bus when it is loading or unloading. But when the yellow lights are on, a motorist knows they can pass or get ready to stop because the bus is about to load or unload. “We do get a lot of violators who can be prosecuted and fined. In our particular program, we get violators due to the nature of the passengers,” Director Porcello said. “Wheelchairs take time to load and unload and some people stop and some don't.

The program was featured in School Bus Fleet” magazine and was presented at the state transportation supervisors conference in Columbus last year.

## **Ash/Craft is Audited Every Year**



July 13,1991

According to Ashtabula County Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities Board Superintendent Richard J. Cozza, Jr., the MR/DD Board should receive the results of its yearly audit from the Ash/Craft Board by September. He said the audit is a housekeeping procedure for Ash/Craft, but the MR/DD Board receives the audit results because of its obvious relationship with Ash/Craft.

Although Ash/Craft doesn't use public funds, the Board conducts the audit every year to make sure its records are in order. The budget is made up of money received through work contracts.

Ash/Craft which is similar to a school program for handicapped adults, was created in the 1970s. It employs about 200 handicapped adults for contract work. The Ash/Craft work training program prepares clients either for competitive employment or for sheltered employment. When Ash/Craft was created, an issue of who would pay the salaries of the 200 employees and for the equipment they used was raised.

Superintendent Cozza said the Ash/Craft Board was created as the entity to pay the workers. It is a private, non-profit board, which employs the handicapped members at Ash/Craft. The Ash/Craft Board obtains contracts from companies according to fair employment laws so jobs are not taken from others in the community. The Ash/Craft Board uses the money from those contracts to pay the employees and purchase equipment and materials needed for present or future contracts. He said the Board's budget is compiled of money from contracts and each year an audit must be conducted as a “good business practice.”

He added that since there is a relationship between the MR/DD Board and the Ash/Craft Board, the audit findings are provided to the MR/DD board every year. The Ash/Craft Board is primarily made up of people from chambers of commerce, the business community and others in the community interested in helping. "Someone had their head on straight when they were deciding who should pay these employees. MR/DD could not pay them because then they would have become civil servants and been paid with public funds," Superintendent Cozza said.

He said since the money to pay the workers is from contracts, county money goes toward other programs that are directly funded by MR/DD. "We've been really careful to make sure the handicapped employees are paid from the contracts, not county money. No tax money is used to pay a client a wage for what they do and they are not competing for jobs in Ashtabula County."

## **MR/DD to Introduce Whole Language Approach**

July 14, 1991

A new computerized language program will begin this school year at Happy Hearts School which will use a whole language approach to teaching handicapped children.

The new IBM computerized language program has been used in a few areas around the county and Ashtabula County will be one of the pioneers in using his program said Richard J. Cozza, Jr., superintendent of the Ashtabula County Board of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities. "We really want to see if the computerized language program could work with these students," he said. "The program should be in place by this August when the school year starts."

He said that over the past two years, there has been an attempt to use a whole language approach to education with students ages 12 to 21 at the school and that this whole language approach has become a success with handicapped children.

In the whole language approach, everything is language oriented and there is more discussion in the classroom when lessons are being taught. "Everything is language oriented and the kids discuss more," he said. "In many cases, if they had more language skills they would function better in the community because they would be better able to express themselves."

The computer system, hardware, software, and the classroom modifications for the program will cost about \$9,600. The MRDD Board has approved funds for the project to be used from donations to the board.

Superintendent Cozza said since the whole language program has been successful so far in the classrooms, it was decided to give the computer program a try. He said this computer language program is relatively new and Ashtabula County will be one of the first places to have multi-handicapped children on a regular schedule using the program. He predicted there should be some results from the program by the end of the school year after the children have been able to use the program for a while.

According to Superintendent Cozza, there has been a lot of positive feedback from parents whose children are being taught through the whole language program. "Some parents have said they have noticed their children's ability to express themselves has improved," he said. "We

have also seen that when there are dramatic improvements made in their language skills, there are improvements in other areas as well.”

1992

## **State Budget Cuts Slash MR/DD Subsidies**

Star Beacon

January 14, 1992

Three subsidies for the Ashtabula County Board of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities have been adversely affected by the state budget cuts.

In addition to public schools seeing cuts, MR/DD Superintendent Richard J. Cozza Jr. said the state notified him last week that school age children will receive 2.6 percent or \$42,000 less this year; preschool children ages 3 to 5 will receive 6 percent or \$13,066 less; and transportation will receive 6 percent or \$5,366 less.

“Starting this month, we will receive a total of \$31,211 less from the state,” Superintendent Cozza said. “Apparently, they are trying to make up the deficit. But when you add that with what the other money schools aren’t getting, that comes out to be quite a bit of money that is not coming to Ashtabula County.”

He said although he is concerned about the cuts, the Ohio Department of Mental Retardation may be able to make up the difference in the subsidy loss.

“The difficulty is I don’t know yet if they will be able to make up the loss and we’re tight budget wise already.”

## **First Autistic Class at Happy Hearts**

March 8, 1992

Class brings change to autistic students

Nancy Erikson

Working with the first ever all autistic children class at Happy Hearts School, preschool teacher Penny Ellis and her assistant Pam Coates have seen changes for the better in their students.

The Autism Society of Ohio defines autism as a brain disorder, present from birth, which affects the way the brain uses information. Although the cause of autism is still unknown, some research suggests a physical problem affecting those parts of the brain that process language and information coming in from the senses. Experts believe there may be some imbalance of certain chemicals in the brain and genetic factors may sometimes be involved.



The Autism Society of Ohio claims that autism may result from a combination of several causes, but no factors in the psychological environment of the child cause autism.

Teacher Penny Ellis said that up until this year, children with autism were mixed in with other classes at Happy Hearts. Then four children around the same age came to the school and it was decided they would be grouped into a class by themselves. Penny Ellis and Pam Coates were asked to work with the class, which has four children ranging in age from three to five years old. The class meets three half-days a week. “” We’ve seen such a difference in them. All concerned have said this is the way to go,” Penny Ellis said.

Each child has an Individualized Education Plan that the teacher Ellis and her aide Pam Coates follow. Many of the skills they teach are self-help skills such as dressing, language, hygiene, and understanding the world around them. Penny Ellis said that the main objective is chiseling away at the communication barrier the children have with the rest of the world. “The children are normally intelligent with their biggest obstacle being the communication barrier,” she said.

When the class began, teacher Ellis kept the sensory stimulus at a minimum so the children could adjust. She credits much of the success of the class to the support she receives from her teacher aide Pam Coates and the other school staff. As with all the students we’re hoping for mainstreaming them, but we’ll have to wait and see how each one reacts,” she said. “They are so individual, but we’d sure want them to use all the potential they’ve got.”

From New Directions

Fall 1992

A Community Newsletter of the Ashtabula County Board of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities

Trivia Tidbits

by Linda Porcello

- Bet you didn’t know that the Ashtabula County Board of MR/DD employs 155 full-time staff and over 40 substitutes.
- Bet you didn’t know that the Ash/Craft greenhouse sells over 7,500 geraniums every Spring
- Bet you didn’t know that the Ash/Craft woodshop built and sold over 190 picnic tables in 1991 and 1992.
- Bet you didn’t know the number of people that our Board serves is in excess of 690 including Happy Hearts School, Ash/Craft Workshop, Community Employment, Supportive Home Services and Case Management.
- Bet you didn’t know that Ash/Craft greenhouse sells over 3,500 poinsettia plants at Christmas time.
- Bet you didn’t know that our buses travel 1,680 miles daily on a school day and 1,204 miles daily on a “workshop only” day.
- Good News!! For the first time in what seems like ages, new equipment will be coming for the Ash/Craft greenhouse. A new “seeder” will save money because we will plant seeds to make “plugs” (tiny starter plants) instead of buying them. A germination chamber and a fertilizer injector will also be added.



1993



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Ash/Craft Industries, Inc.

**Spring, Summer, Winter, and Fall**

**Getting the Greenhouse Ready for**



*Jan Searcy of Jefferson learns to use a seeder, a new piece of equipment at the Ash/Craft Industries greenhouse. Ashtabula Star Beacon photos by Laura S. Burgard*

January 31, 1993

January seems like a shivery time to plant seeds for spring, but workers at the Ash/Craft Greenhouse have the shelter, equipment, and enthusiasm to plant and grow for all seasons.

Barbara Cook, who has managed the greenhouse for more than 15 years, said that the workers have already started the geraniums “and we’re just starting the seeds for begonias and impatiens.”

Manager Cook explained that the workers cut the geraniums from mother plants left over from last year, but they start the other flowers from seed, a process that they have just recently been able to do because of their new seeder, germinator, and fertilizer injector. She said that fertilizer injector allows workers to be sure that the entire plant has been fertilized, but the seeder and germinator are the two pieces of equipment that have allowed Ash/Craft to independently produce plants and save money.

The seeder is a tray on short legs with a second tray fitted into the main part of the machine. Workers spread seeds on the tray which has small holes in a grid. A small vacuum motor holds the seeds to the holes. Extra seeds are allowed to slide into a trough on the side of the seeder and then the worker turns the seeder upside down over a “plug tray,” a tray made of small plastic cells filled with soil. When workers turn off the vacuum, the tiny seeds which are perfectly lined up with the sections, drop into the soil.

Ash/Craft workers grow seedlings in the germinator, a piece of equipment resembling a grocery store cooler. The germinator has a thermostat inside and the bottom is filled with water. When the lid is closed, the water in the bottom evaporates and continuously falls on the tiny plants. Before Ash/Craft bought the seeder and germinator, it had to ship in trays of tiny sprouts. With the new equipment, workers can plant trays right in the greenhouse which saves shipping costs.

According to Manager Cook, Ash/Craft workers will begin the bulk of the planting in mid-February. “We plant vegetables, perennials, and annuals. We start selling in April and go through May, June, and July,” she said.

The greenhouse still operates when the spring and summer selling season is over. In July and August, the greenhouse workers start planting poinsettias for Christmas. In September and October, workers have to cover the poinsettia cuttings with black plastic at night so the bus security lights don’t get them. Then, every morning, the workers have to uncover them. Last year’s poinsettias go into poinsettia trees. Poinsettia trees bloom like the plant, but they become much larger,” Manager Cook said.

She added that greenhouse workers also craft and sell silk flowers for weddings, but “we don’t advertise. It’s just by word of mouth.”

## **Ash/Craft Industries May Expand Services**

April 27, 1993

Ash/Craft Industries is hoping to use \$190,000 in Medicaid funds to expand facilities and offer services to more clients.

Richard Cozza, Superintendent at Ash/Craft, said recently that the sheltered workshop, which serves mentally retarded and developmentally disabled adults, recently learned that Ashtabula County is eligible for 70 percent state funding for an expansion project. “We’re eligible for 70 percent funding from the state due to the economics of Ashtabula County,” he said.

According to Superintendent Cozza, the project, estimated to cost \$667,000, would add a workshop and four or five additional classrooms in a 7,500 square foot expansion to the facility. He said that presently there isn't enough room for all the clients Ash/Craft is serving and there are 50 additional people in the Workshop all paid for by Medicaid, but there is also a need for capital improvements.

The Superintendent added that two years ago, the State of Ohio allowed Medicaid funds to pay for services at Ash/Craft and these funds would be used for the school's portion of the building project with no tax dollars used. He said that Ash/Craft serves 500 clients in Ashtabula County, but a waiting list has existed for years and so far, Ash/Craft hasn't been able to serve more people. He estimated that the additional cost for the expansion will be minimal to serve 50 new people, and costs would be in utility and maintenance only. No new staff would be hired for the expansion.

"By next fall, we hope to have \$190,000 saved in Medicaid funds for the local match of the project," Superintendent Cozza said. "It will be another six months before we're ready to do with this project, and hopefully we can have it completed next spring."

## **County MR/DD Superintendent Elected Secretary of State Board**

September 2, 1993

Richard J. Cozza, superintendent of the Ashtabula County Board of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities, has been elected secretary of the Ohio Superintendents Association of County MR/DD Boards. The state organization was established ten years ago and performs an advisory role in legislation, legal, and program issues involving the county boards. The Northwest Region of Superintendents nominated Cozza and elected him in August.

Superintendent Cozza said that his position would help Ashtabula County because it will enable him to get first hand information and to give input from the area. He said he would work to see that Ashtabula County interests would be recognized. "Our organization has always tried to stay a little bit in the forefront on the issues that heavily affect us. We are the 16<sup>th</sup> largest program in the state and how we will have an impact on the legislation that is passed."

Beginning this year, a major legislative program funding system takes each county's tax bracket into account, he said. The system is designed to aid lower income countries and will enable Ashtabula to receive higher government subsidies because the county collects less in taxes.

## **Teacher Barbara Turchetta Receives Grant for Sex Education Program at Happy Hearts**

June 1993

Happy Hearts teacher Barbara Turchetta recently applied for and received a \$200 grant from the Marketing Our Schools Committee to pay for staff and parent training to help students learn about human sexuality.

Barbara Turchetta said she was inspired to apply for the grant after reading a letter from the parent of a 13-year-old boy in her class, asking that her son receive sex education. The grant enables Happy Hearts School to bring in outside help, such as a nurse who has experience in the area. Parents will be included through the entire planning process. "Although it's a very private matter, and parents should be involved, the teachers owe it to the parents to help in any way they can," she said.

She explained that the school sent out letters to the parents of all of the 64 intermediate and advanced students and it received 25 to 30 positive responses. Students were excused if their parents didn't want them to take the class, and all parents were invited to a planning session.

MR/DD Board Superintendent Richard Cozza agreed with establishing the class. He recalled that he written a human sexuality curriculum when he taught family life and human development in the Montgomery County Schools in Maryland when he taught multiple-handicapped children. "Toward adulthood they will be living and working in the community. They'll be living less sheltered lives. They are involved in the community these days. They need to know about it."

He also recognized that teaching these children presented more of a challenge than students in a conventional classroom. "A lot depends on the kids. A lot of them will never understand the physical part of it, but they can understand the emotions. It's very individual, based on what the child can understand."

## **Happy Hearts Teachers and Staff Strike**

September 28, 1993

Members of the Ashtabula County Employees Association for the Mentally Handicapped went on strike late Monday night, September 27, after rejecting the latest contract offer by the Board of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities. The Union represents 108 members, including teachers, teacher assistants, nursing, speech and physical therapy staffs, workshop specialists, workshop aids and bus assistants. The strike affects about 170 students at Happy Hearts School and 220 clients at Ash/Craft Workshop. The Union contends that salaries, insurance, vacancies and assignments are the important issues. The Ashtabula Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities Board responded that the Union's demands were above what any school district paid and that the Board cannot afford to meet the Union's demands.

Ninety-five percent of the Union membership marched on the picket lines, peacefully blocking the path of employees arriving for work at the school.

"This is the first-time union members have ever went on strike. It was a difficult decision for the membership to make," Union spokeswoman Elaine Marcy said.

"We offered the union a 2 percent, 3 percent and 3 percent raise over the next three years" said Richard Cozza Board Superintendent. "We also offered an increase in longevity pay. The current pay is \$500 for every four years; we offered to increase it to \$750 for every four years. This is the top of the scale and they won't even take it back to the union."

Board Superintendent Cozza said union representatives refused the contract proposal and opted to strike after the board refused to meet their demands. The union wanted 5 percent, 4 percent, 4 percent over the next three years," he said.

Union President Elaine Marcy said, "The association is disappointed by the lack of respect given us and the children whose service is being disrupted." She said that "over the last three years Superintendent Cozza has received an 18-percent increase in salary. The administration and staff got a 13 ½ percent increase over the last three years and they continue to receive a 3-4- and 5 percent raise every year. What we are asking for isn't out of line. We are at the bottom of the salary scale in this county. We want to get to the middle of it at least."

Contract negotiations have been going on since the original three-year contract expired in August. The employees have been working under a contract extension pending negotiations.

Most parents remarked that they wished the two sides could have hammered out a contract without a strike. "My son will stay home until the strike is settled," Inez Gaumer, president of the Association for Retarded Citizens, said. Another parent, Nadine Moroski, a founding parent of Happy Hearts School, said she supported the teachers. "I don't like to see the strike. This is the first time in all the years we've had the school that there was a strike. I don't like to see it because the children and the clients suffer. I hope the Board will reconsider on some of the issues and end the strike."

The Happy Hearts School-Ash/Craft Industries strike officially ended on Wednesday, October 6, 1993 when union members met Wednesday morning to vote on the contract proposed by the Board of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities. The union ratified the tentative agreement by a secret ballot vote of 82 to 19. The board will meet at 4 p.m. today to vote on the contract.

The Board of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities and union officials reached a tentative agreement on a new contract Tuesday evening after negotiating 11 hours.

"While many members expressed a belief that the board could and should do better, this was a defensive strike," said Elaine Marcy, union spokeswoman. "The association went on strike to protect its contract and to prevent further cuts in its fringe benefits. We succeeded in that goal. There will be no more cuts in fringe benefits."

Board Superintendent Richard Cozza said Tuesday's negotiations began with the health care issue.

"We started off with the idea that if health care is the primary issue we should make a proposal to keep the health care the way it is," he said. "By doing this we reduced the wage offer to a 2 percent increase in each of the three years of the contract." He said the board will put together a new committee made up of people from the administration and the employees to review the health care plan over the upcoming months. "The key to the whole thing is education; once people understand the costs and how the plans work we can work together to improve the benefits package."

The board and the union have been trying to hammer out a new contract since the original expired in August. The board initially offer the union a 2 percent 3 percent and 3 percent raise over three years along with longevity pay and a contributory health package.

The union rejected this offer and said it wanted a 5 percent, 4 percent and 4 percent increase over three years and no change in their benefits package After this proposal was rejected by the board, the strike began.

“The raise the union has settled for is not as high as what we initially offered or what they were asking, but this will allow us time to catch up in the front year with other districts,” Superintendent Cozza said “In some ways we are doing well with this offer considering many districts have a wage freeze.”

Marcy said wages weren't the issue and that the strike wasn't over wages.

Cozza said teachers and staff took time Wednesday to clean up classrooms and prepare for the arrival of students today.

“The teachers are back in the classroom today (Wednesday) but Thursday and Friday will be regular classroom days with the clients,” Superintendent Cozza said.

Parents of students said they were happy to see the students returning to school. Most parents were concerned with their children having their routines altered by staying out of school.

“I'm glad the strike is over and they could come to a compromise,” said Pam Esposito. Esposito's daughter is autistic and a student at Happy Hearts.

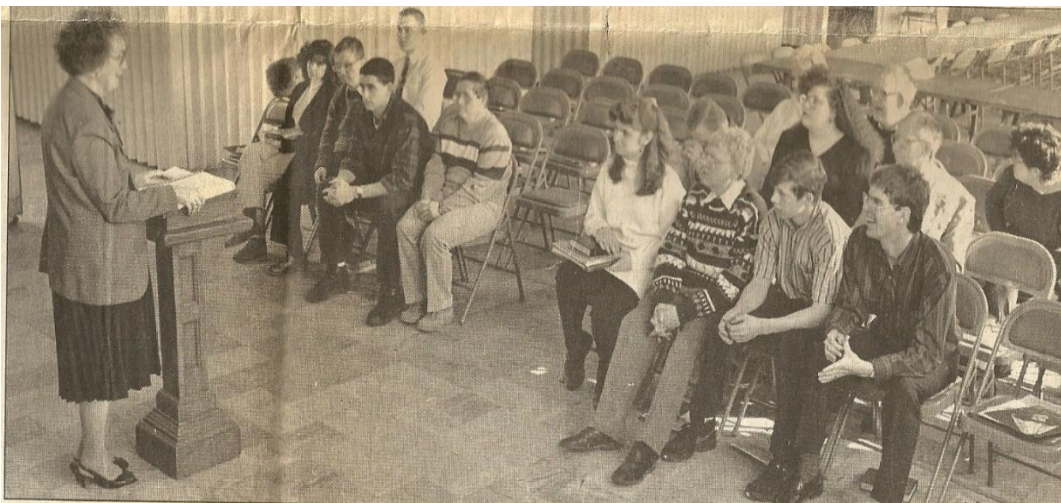
“I am happy the teachers got what they wanted with benefits. My daughter is autistic and nonverbal but I am sure she will be happy to back in her usual routine.”

Another parent, Robin Coxon, said she was relieved the strike had ended for both parties' sake. She said her son, who is autistic, needs to be back in school so he can build on his socialization skills,

1994

## **“We Are One in the Spirit”**

February 3, 1994



Inez Gaumer delivers the message during the Sunday morning Interfaith Service for Mentally Retarded. People in Fellowship Hall at First Presbyterian Church in

Ashtabula on January 30, 1994.

Attendance at Inez Gaumer's Interfaith Sunday School Classes for Mentally Retarded people at First Presbyterian Church in Ashtabula dropped on the next to the last day of January 1994. She was slightly surprised, but not discouraged, remarking that the program usually enjoyed faithful attendance from mentally retarded and developmentally disabled people bused in from group homes and residences throughout Ashtabula and the county. "Their attendance is tremendous. It must mean a lot to them, because they come every Sunday," she said.

For Inez every Sunday has meant 25 years' worth of Sundays of service to the disabled community. The mother of a special needs child herself, Inez founded the program with the encouragement and help of the pastors of the church at the time, Reverend George Johnson and Richard Baker and assistance from Dorothy Sparks. Gene Moroski, one of the original parent group who founded Happy Hearts, joined the class a few years later and provides the music.

According to Inez, the class has grown from a small group to 38 students. Four of the students, Claude Gaumer; Larry Moroski; Danny Brunell; and John Pickett have attended the class since its beginning in 1969. Margie Rihn, former First Presbyterian Christian Education coordinator, said many of the class members have been coming to the classes since they were teenagers.

"We run the gamut," Inez said. "In the past we have had younger students, but right now 28 is our youngest. We have had them from eight on up."

A past president of the local Association for Retarded Persons and a trustee of the state organization, Inez believes that interfaith services strive to make worship and the Christian life understandable and accessible. "I think the mentally retarded have a right to religious education, just as anybody else," she said. "If we fail to recognize the special gifts people with disabilities possess, we are missing part of God's message for us."



## Happy Hoopsters

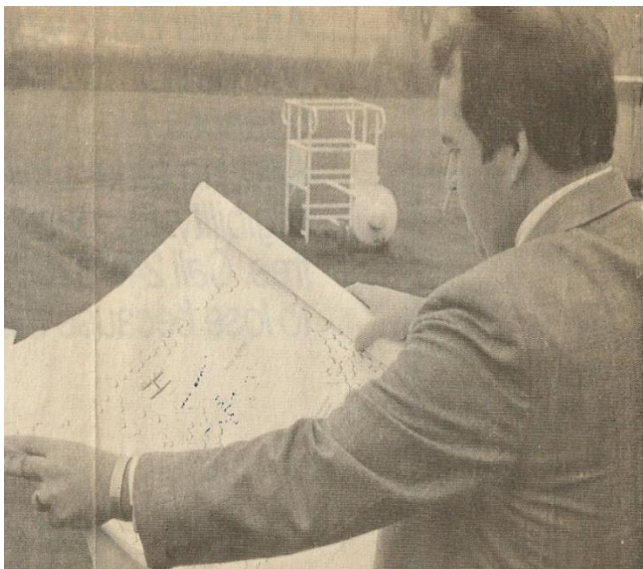


*The Happy Hearts Varsity Basketball Team posed for its team photo after completing their season. Finishing with a 500 record for the season, the team will play the Happy Hearts faculty team as a finale. Front from left are Nick Marsh; Doug Dragon; Jacob Zelczer; Michael Emery; and Luis Perez. Back row from left are Coach Pam Keep; Ron Turner; David Baker; Dan Hunt; Manager William Griswold; Frank Johnson; and assist coach Brent*

*Woerner. March 17, 1994. Ashtabula Star Beacon photo by Jim Matthews.*

## The Park – Japan, Richard Cozza, Dick Flower, Stan Gaumer, and Ashtabula County (1993-1995)

New Park Planned

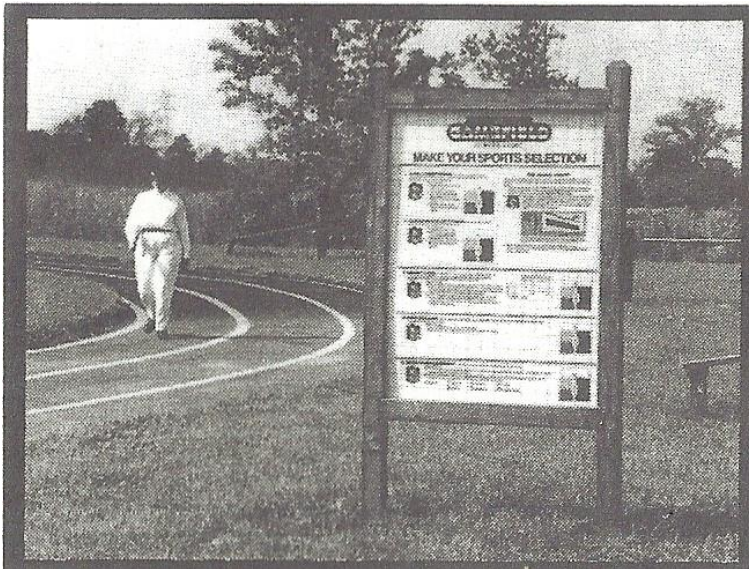


*Richard J. Cozza, MR/DD Board Superintendent looks over plans for a park to be developed in the large area behind Happy Hearts School. Ashtabula Star Beacon Photo by Carl E. Feather*

Argenteri Associates, architects and planners, have prepared preliminary drawings for a community park and playground that will serve the Kingsville community and Happy Hearts School and Ash/Craft Sheltered Workshop. The park would be developed on about eight acres between the school and workshop and could be a joint project of

county and local governments, private individuals, and the Ashtabula County Board of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities, according to Richard J. Cozza Board Superintendent who asked the Board to review the plans.

The drawings feature a terraced slope extending from the school to the workshop, with a playground, ballfield, a court for basketball and paddleball, a pavilion, a track and field that could be used for the Special Olympics, a track with exercise stations, and a picnic area.



Superintendent Cozza said the architect's drawings illustrated the dreams that many people have had for the field for many years. He suggested establishing a foundation to develop the project and gather donations. He estimated the park project could cost about \$100,000 spread over a period of five years. "I think this can be a community project the Board can work on with other people," he said.

Photo by Doug Mead

The new Special Olympics Park behind Happy Hearts School came about through international and local contributions and the donations and efforts of hundreds of volunteers.

In an Ashtabula Star Beacon story dated June 10, 1993, Carl Feather profiled W. Richard "Dick" Flower, Ashtabula resident and one of the founders of "The Park" behind Happy Hearts School. Ash/Craft parent Stan Gaumer was another major contributor of hundreds of volunteer hours.

The Fall 1995 MR/DD Board newsletter New Directions credits the Miagowa family of Japan, owner of the Rex International Corporation, who purchased local Wheeler Manufacturing and donated substantially to the pavilion development. The Famiko Miagowa Pavilion recognized the efforts of the family matriarch, a leader in advocating for the disabled in Japan. Sandy Coblitz of Wheeler also made substantial contributions to creating the Park. The students at the Ashtabula County Joint Vocational School rebuilt the International Cub Cadet riding mower used to keep the field in order, using parts that International provided at zero net cost.

Dick Flower and Stan Gaumer coordinated the efforts of hundreds of Ashtabula County residents who made the dream of the new park for Special Olympians the community a reality. Dick Flower discovered pavilion blueprints filed and forgotten behind a filing cabinet and he and Stan Gaumer instantly recognized their potential for the community. "We should have more of this in Ashtabula County for our kids to do these things. They may be mentally retarded, but they are not stupid. This is a good outlet for them."



After weeks of preparation, meetings, consultation with Ashtabula County Commissioners, hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of volunteer work, and cash and material donations, the Park took shape. Volunteers ran bulldozers, dug holes, delivered lumber, and donated time and money. The end results included a ballfield, a track, and a park pavilion.

Little league teams, softball teams, church groups, t-ball teams reserve the field and use it on nearly a daily basis. The Special Olympics softball team spent the summer practicing and playing their scheduled games on the field. The one-seventh of a mile paved track provides a place to walk, jog, or run.

Two major projects that still need to be completed are a waterproof floor in the pavilion and paving the parking lot as soon as enough donors and volunteers can be obtained. Donors of time, money, and materials will be listed on a sign marking the entrance to the Park and everyone who donated trees, shrubs, and other times are identified on a schematic on the outside of the pavilion's entry wall.

The Dedication and Open House for The Park was held on September 18, 1993. The Fall 1995 issue of *New Directions* article said that the final version of The Park was turned over to the Ashtabula County Board of MR/DD "which will insure its ongoing improvement and maintenance."

**1995**



### **Preparing for Birds**

*The Bluebird of happiness might pay a visit to the park between Happy Hearts School and Ash/Craft Industries if the students and clients have their way. Superintendent Richard Cozza (left) helps Tom Misch mount a bluebird house in the park's apple orchard off Green Road in Kingsville Township as spring approaches and the birds return. Ashtabula Star Beacon photo by Jim Matthews.*

### **Happy Hearts and Ash/Craft Mark Forty Years of Operation**



*Richard Cozza has been superintendent of Ashtabula County Board of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities for ten years. Ashtabula Star Beacon photo by Diana Lewis.*

March 16, 1995. Happy Hearts School has changed since 1954. Forty years later, the school continues to evolve as it serves the special needs of the developmentally disabled citizens of Ashtabula. Today the school has an enrollment of 150 children, age from birth to 21. Another 250 developmentally disabled adults are affiliated with Ash/Craft, a sheltered workshop built in 1978 adjacent to Happy Hearts School. The inception of the school and its subsequent growth are the product of many years of struggle and dedication, said Richard Cozza superintendent of the Ashtabula County Board of Mental Retardation

“Back in the ‘50s, children were excluded from school,” he said. “It was little grass roots groups of people who began to spring up saying, “This isn’t right. It really turned out to be a human rights issue.”

In March 1954, about nine families with disabled children formed the Ashtabula County Council for Retarded Children. It was exactly one year later when one instructor and one assistant began teaching the children of those families. The local group funded the school with weekly tuition payments of six dollars per child and fund raisers such as bake sales.

“They were out beating the bushes trying to get things going. Eventually, the public began recognizing developmentally disabled citizens’ right to an education. At that point, changes began happening rapidly, both locally and on a national level,” Superintendent Cozza said.

## **Happy Hearts Adds Another Satellite Classroom**

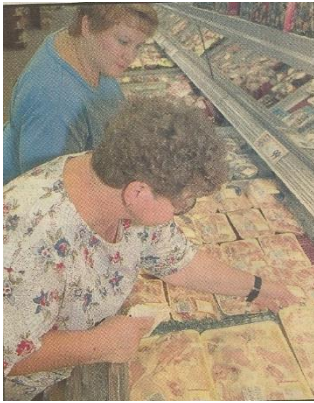
June 21, 1995

In the fall, seven Happy Hearts students will spend their school day at Wallace H. Braden Junior High School in Ashtabula Township. They range in age from 12 to 17 and they are chosen by ability levels. The Braden room will resemble the two-year-old St. John Model, with its own teacher and teacher’s assistant. Their teacher will be Alice Cook, and Barb Carpenter will assist.

The Ashtabula County Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities Board which runs Happy Hearts also has two satellite preschool units at Buckeye’s Lincoln School and a classroom at St. John High School. The program is just one of Happy Heart’s efforts to integrate its students with regular education children.

## Disabled People Live and Work Independently

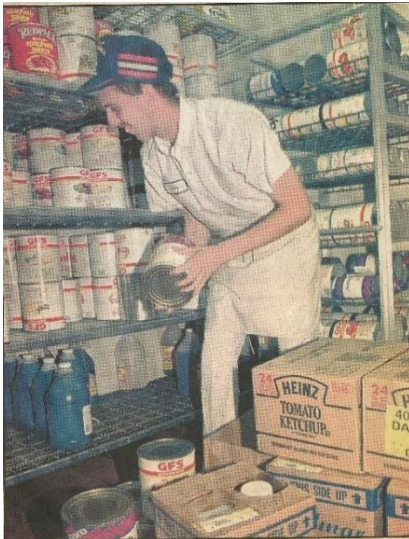
September 10, 1995



*With assistant Linda Deliftt providing guidance, Nancy Freeman learns to pick the best package of chicken. Nancy enjoys cooking when it's her turn and likes to shop as well. Photo by Jim Matthews, Ashtabula Star Beacon.*

Nancy Freeman worked at Ash/Craft Industries before moving out on her own and getting a job at the Ashtabula Mall Food Court. Nancy, 49, was one of the first mentally retarded, developmentally disabled Ashtabula County residents to become self-supporting through a semi-independent living program.

Lynda Perry, Ash/Craft Industries Community Employment Representative said. "She wanted a job out in the community. She's gained a lot of confidence through this, a lot of self-esteem."



*Ray Richmond has thoroughly enjoyed working in the kitchen at the Interstate 80 Truck Stop in Kingsville. He stacks shelves in the storeroom before heading out front to sweep the dining room.*

*Ashtabula Star Beacon photo by Jim Matthews.*

The trend toward integrating developmentally disabled people into the community has been gradual, but it is growing, according to Mary Kay DelPriore, Residential Services Coordinator for the Ashtabula County Board of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities. "Before this, many of these people were stuck in institutions and they've proven they can live in the community," she said.

Many mentally retarded and developmentally disabled people are able to move into the community using government waivers. Each Ohio County is awarded money to help the disabled make it out on their own, away from sheltered institutions. The money can't be used for rent, utilities, or food. Most rely on secondary incomes like part-time jobs to pay for living expenses, Mary Kay said.

1996

Ice Berg...Dead Ahead!

New Directions, Summer 1996

by Richard J. Cozza, Jr. Superintendent

The icy waters of state and federal support for people with disabilities are becoming even more turbulent right now, and there are rumors of icebergs and storms on the horizon. The danger is coming both from Washington and from Columbus, and they bear close watching by all of us.

We've all followed the budget discussions in Washington concerning the Medicaid program, which plays a large part in the lifelog needs of people with disabilities. We all know that the federal budget must be controlled and that the Medicaid program must be slowed, but be careful. A managed care Medicaid program developed in haste and by compromise can leave people with long term care needs at the bottom of the priority list. And that often is the fate of people with disabilities when they have to compete with others in the system.

In addition, there is talk in Columbus of changing the human services system to one Medicaid-driven human services mega-agency, which again would place people with disabilities at the bottom of the priority list by virtue of numbers alone.

So, be vigilant. Yes, support the control of federal spending, which we all know we must do for financial responsibility, but be aware of how both Washington and Columbus are talking about long-term care for people with disabilities and how they propose to manage a system of care and services. The differences in the proposals is like night and day, and some don't even mention this group at all. Let your federal and state law makers know of your concern and that you've heard the rumors of significant change and that you are concerned. Ask your representative to keep you informed as proposals are made.

Remember that this new State Legislature is made up of many brand new lawmakers who have not had contact with parents or County Board or MR/DD staff. Services for people with disabilities are not well known to them as they were with our former, more experienced legislators. They need to hear from us (and they are) if they are to have any idea of what we've worked so hard to build over the past 40 years. Just as those founding parents did years ago, the assistance and contact of our families, staff and friends now will have a similar effect on the future of services through the year 2000 and beyond.

## Parents Question Cut Backs



*Tony Orlando, a parent of a Happy Heart's student, expresses his concerns about staff cuts at the school during a meeting of the Ashtabula County Board of Retardation and Developmental Disabilities.*

September 17, 1996

Parent, teachers and therapists of students at Ash/Craft Industries and Happy Hearts School expressed frustration to the Ashtabula County Board of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities at a Monday night Board meeting. There were even threats of lawsuits if conditions don't improve.

The more than 50 residents were angry that services including occupational, speech, and physical therapy had been reduced and that families hadn't been informed of the Board's or state's financial condition. While there have been no layoffs, Board Superintendent Richard Cozza, Jr. said classes have been combined and some contracted services eliminated because the Board and others like it statewide, received nearly \$500,000 less in federal and state monies during the last two years.

The Board also needs to pay \$100,000 to the state by the end of the year, something Superintendent Cozza said he is hoping to do in 1997 after more money comes in. "The goal is to stall and pay it back in 1997," Superintendent Cozza said. "We've worked with the state all along and they know what we're dealing with."

Parents attending Monday's Board meeting said they understood the reductions came from the state and federal levels, but they continued to question the Board about choices it made in not filling positions, including physical education and music and ending contracts with therapists.



“I realize there are cuts, but these are state laws you’re violating – the children’s individual education plans -,” said Tony Orlando, parent of a four-year-old autistic boy who attends Happy Hearts School. “It is ethically and morally wrong to not have them, and if you don’t reinstate these programs and the problem is not rectified, we will take legal action.”

Tony Orlando was one of the many parents and teachers who said they are frustrated their children no longer have occupational or speech therapy.

“If we don’t have the encouragement from you, how are we supposed to get it from the public schools that don’t have the understanding that you do and who often follow your example?” they asked.

## **Possible Financial Disaster for Happy Hearts and Ash/Craft: November and December 1996**

November 13, 1996. Ashtabula County Board of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities Superintendent Richard Cozza wrote a three-page letter to Happy Hearts and Ash/Craft staff and parents advising them that financial disaster threatened to halt their program. and that he and the MR/DD Board were going to have to make some tough decisions. In his letter, he detailed 18 months of “consistently bad financial news” and said that payrolls and benefits hopefully are covered through the end of 1996, but we are holding bills to protect our staffing expenses.”

He said that the Board’s 1996 revenue will likely be \$100,000 less than projected and that the board could expect an additional \$100,000 decrease in 1997.

He wrote that any bills left unpaid so late in the year create an instant deficit for 1997, which already was shaping up to be plagued with ongoing financial woes. He felt that he and the administrative team and the Board should come up with a solution to the finances, but he thought that this crisis, created by economics, was bigger than everyone and everyone had to pull together to solve it or come up with alternatives.

The reasons Superintendent Cozza cited for the unrelenting financial concerns included a poor tax-base, which places Ashtabula County on the bottom third of counties statewide on a per-mill basis. “That means, to run the same cost program as a wealthier county, we need more local taxes to do it,” he wrote. He also noted a larger client population. “We simply have more clients to serve with the local tax money we have,” he wrote.

In his letter, Superintendent Cozza suggested that the staff and board work together to come up with alternatives.” We have no room for error in the judgements we will have to make and the trust we will have to put in each other. Alienation and bad feelings will prove to be our undoing.” He concluded the letter by saying, “Good luck to all of us.”

A related story by reporter Stephen Siff appeared in the Jefferson Gazette. The Gazette story also quoted Superintendent Cozza as at least partially blaming the poor local tax base in Ashtabula County as for the Board’s continuing financial woes. Local taxes provide about 50 percent of the Board’s revenue which amounted to \$3,512,700 in 1995. We collect \$2,369 per client per mill of

taxes in 1995, which is in the bottom third of counties he wrote in the letter. "This means to run the same cost program as a wealthier county, we need more local taxes to do it."

Over the last five years, local taxpayer contributions to the MR/DD Board have increased about 15 percent. The amount of state money flowing to the Board has fluctuated, dropping from \$1,516,408 in 1991 to \$1,324,845 in 1995. Also, over the last five years, the MR/DD Board budget has grossly expanded, largely due to funds from federal sources. The largest source has been Medicaid. In 1991, the Board collected no money from Medicaid billing. In 1995, it collected \$943,862. While receipts have increased by 25 percent from 1991 to 1995, expenditures increased 41 percent during the same period.

On November 16, 1996, The Ashtabula Star Beacon added its editorial voice. The editorial writer said that even before news began to break this week that the MR/DD was in desperate straits, moves already were under way to cut back. Last summer, the MR/DD Board eliminated a number of positions, including three teachers. It is a sad situation that Don Cosner, President of the Association of Retarded Citizens, summed up best when he said, "They've cut services almost to the bare bones now. Everything we've built over the past 40 years, we're right back where we started."

Since 1955, when the Happy Hearts School opened, the program grew and grew and grew. It increased classes, programs, moved from building to building and eventually to its own building. It also added a fleet of busses.

A fact of life is that a program of this magnitude, which is desperately needed in this county, is costly to maintain. The cost per student at Happy Hearts is \$23,259.22. The local cost per student is \$17,091.31, with the remainder paid by the state. That makes it a heavy burden locally.

While the future of MR/DD is still being cast, one thing for certain there will be a demand for an accounting of why it found itself in financial straits. Fingers are being pointed now and will continue to be pointed in a number of directions. That also is probably a fact of life. And this is not untypical. In our society we build institutions, such as those of the MR/DD and the school systems, but sometimes fail to realize that to continue to maintain and/or improve, the costs escalate.

## **Task Force Probing MR/DD**

November 26, 1996

Ashtabula County Commissioners appointed a special task force to investigate the Ashtabula County Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities Board program, intent on discovering how the agency racked up a \$700,000 deficit in the past year. The seven-member task force will meet and begin reviewing MR/DD records and interviewing staff.

Task force members include newly-appointed MR/DD Board members Tom Nassief, Robert Taylor, and Ronald Tate; Claudia Conway, a former MR/DD staff member; Kelly Bastanian, a parent of an MR/DD client; Roger Corlett, certified public accountant; and Jeanne Bento, Ashtabula County Commissioner.

The task force will study the operation of the MR/DD, examine its participant levels, the services it's required to offer and review current and projected appropriations," said George Distel,

Ashtabula County Commissioner. “We’re expecting this to be a short-term effort, hopefully the task force will be done with their work by January or so.”

Commissioners said they were concerned over reports MR/DD programs are in financial crisis and felt a task force would be able to move more quickly to get answers.

## **MR/DD Gets Emergency Financial Boost**

November 27, 1996

A story by Mark Owens in the Jefferson Gazette notes that the Ashtabula County Board of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities received a budget reprieve at least until the end of the year. Facing a \$700,000 shortfall at the end of this year, the program received about \$410,500 in advances and allocations from various agencies to meet payroll and contract service obligations through the beginning of 1997.

Ashtabula County Commissioners made an emergency appropriation to the Board on Tuesday, allowing the MR/DD Board to move \$91,500 from its gifts account to its general fund. The money will come from three funds established through the board. Two of them are longstanding funds, The Winger and Burlington Trust Funds and the Trustees Fund.

Board Superintendent Richard Cozza told Commissioners that donations made to the funds with specific directions for their use won’t be part of the allocations. The balance of the funds, as of this week, totaled nearly \$120,000.

The remaining emergency funding comes from the state MR/DD program in the amount of \$250,000 and an advance of delinquent tax monies from the Ashtabula County Auditor’s Office in the amount of \$69,000. The money is either an advance from the MR/DD Board’s anticipated 1997 revenue or an allocation of existing MR/DD funds. Ashtabula County Commissioners noted that no extra county funds were used in Tuesday’s appropriation.

The emergency appropriations won’t cancel the layoff notices and cutbacks in the MR/DD programs. About 16 positions are slated to be cut from Happy Hearts and Ash/Craft Industries and other cutbacks may also be necessary.

## **MR/DD Board Terminates 14 People**

December 4, 1996

The Ashtabula County Board of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities announced that it has cut 14 people from its programs to help resolve its financial crisis. The cuts equate to 22 percent of the administration; seven percent of the education staff; and five percent of the service staff. The cuts include the positions of Happy Hearts principal; case manager and supervisor; transportation coordinator; habilitation manager. They also include a psychologist; early intervention instructor; four positions on adult registered services staff; two clerk/typists; and two classroom assistants.

According to James Barnes, chairman of the MR/DD Board Finance Committee, said the layoffs will produce a savings of about \$713,000, compared to the \$800,000 estimated to be necessary to keep Happy Hearts operating. Happy Hearts serves 105 children, ages 3 to 21.

Integrating two classrooms of Happy Hearts students into public school districts by July 1, 1997 will produce additional savings as will reducing contract services costs and cutting hours of school physical therapy and the Andover Early Intervention program.

The MR/DD Board unanimously approved the cuts in front of a crowded room of anxious employees, parents, and citizens. The heart-rending financial decisions became necessary when MR/DD discovered it would receive \$300,000 less in federal and state funding in 1997, after a long spell of belt-tightening and carrying over only \$300,000-\$400,000 into the new year.

Board President Jean Fields said that the Board should end the year with at least one million dollars just to get through the first two months. “We haven’t had that kind of carryover,” she said.

Looking to take future steps toward a smaller budget, the Board voted to:

- Make service levels for all ages – infant, student, and adult- proportionate to available revenue. Currently MR/DD spends \$5,000 above the state average on early intervention, ages 0 to 3.
- Continue integrating the least disabled children into public schooling.
- Establish a Medicaid reserve balance account by saving 10 percent of every Medicaid check to repay overpayment by the Ohio Department of MR/DD.
- Consider placing an MR/DD operating levy on the ballot for 1997.

## **MR/DD Board Hasn’t Seen State Allocation**

December 17, 1996

At the MR/DD Board meeting Monday, Board President Richard Cozza said that money for the state has decreased since last year, but Parent Coordinator Kelly Batanian disagreed. She argued that according to conversations she has had with U.S. Representative Steven C. LaTourette, the federal government has appropriated an additional two billion dollars for special needs students. Superintendent Cozza said that he has not yet seen any of that money. “We have to budget for what the state is telling us now and the state revenue is down,” he said.

Board members faced unfavorable reactions for its approval of cuts to staff and programs at Happy Hearts and Ash/Craft Industries. President Jean Fields defended the Board position in approving the cuts. She said, “I know some people think the new board will make a big difference. There’s two problems they’ll have. There will still be only 100 cents to a dollar and not enough dollars to run this program as we know it should be run.”

Monday’s meeting marked the end of the terms of five MR/DD Board members: Jim Barnes, Lisa Hake, Janet Vettel, Thomas Gwilt, and Rosemary Bernato.

1997

## **MR/DD Board Expects Belt Tightening**

February 7, 1997

While no cutbacks or reductions are in store for Ashtabula County Board of Mental Retardation/Developmental Disabilities programs, both staff and clients can expect a period of financial belt-tightening.

A report released by the MR/DD Task Force made 28 recommendations, most centered around financial reforms. Formed in November 1996 by Ashtabula County Commissioners, the task force presented numerous recommendations mostly centered around financial reforms. Formed in November 1996 by Ashtabula County Commissioners, the task force presented numerous recommendations to bring the program back into financial shape as well as a report on how MR/DD found itself in financial straits.

“We make these recommendations not to frighten or blame people but to bring the program back onto a firm footing,” said Tom Nassief, task force chairman and newly appointed MR/DD chairman. “Our goal is to restore the public’s trust in the programs that do so much for the many clients we have here. We’ve tried to take a fair approach, looking at operations, finances, and past performance.”

## **Looking at Levies**

MR/DD Plans to Place Levy on May Ballot

February 7, 1997

Ashtabula County Board of Mental Retardation/Developmental Disabilities members decided to seek a 0.5 mill seven-year renewal levy on the May Ballot. If the voters approve it, the levy will replace a similar one that expires at the end of 1997. The new levy will generate about \$500,000 per year for seven years.

## **President Tom Nassief Questions MR/DD Finances**

February 20, 1997

MR/DD Board members were focused on reorganizing the financial structure of Happy Hearts School and Ash/Craft Industries at its February, 1997 meeting. At the start of the meeting, President Tom Nassief asked probing questions about expenditure totals surpassing receipts for the new 1997 budget. Budget totals revealed a \$136,879 difference between projected receipts and expenditures. Finance Director Vicki Martin said an unattached balance from the previous year covered the difference. “That still does not relieve my concerns about this organization and the financial structure,” Nassief said.

President Nassief moved to create and implement a management committee to serve as an official part of the board. The committee would be composed of representatives from the MR/DD office, the school program, the adult program, support services, transportation, cafeteria, custodial, case management, supportive living, and the two company unions. The advisory

management committee motion passed unanimously and the committee will hold its first meeting on February 26.

## **MR/DD Management Committee Meets**

March 5, 1997

The new Ashtabula County Mental Retardation/Developmental Disabilities Board mostly considered finances at its March meeting. Board member Robert Taylor said that the Board would consider any proposal that would save some money between now and December 31 and encouraged the members of the new management committee to keep their ears open.

Board President Thomas Nassief and Board member Taylor both said that they were concerned that the MR/DD Board would have trouble stretching its 1997 money to the end of the year, in spite of the permanent staff cutbacks that the previous board made to get through the final months of 1996.

President Nassief pressed board treasurer Vickie Martin for figures on the possible shortfall from its 1996 budget. The Board has renewal of one of its two levies on the ballot in May. Together, the two county-wide levies provide 54 percent of the Board's budget.

MR/DD staff presentations seemed to add instead of subtract from the Board's budget woes. Mechanic Mike Kushma informed the Board that the underground gas tank by the Ash/Craft parking lot would probably need to be removed within the year to comply with Environmental Protection Agency rules. Superintendent Richard Cozza said that an estimate he had gotten a few years before estimated that it would cost between \$3,000 and \$5,000 to remove the tank and no money had been factored into the budget for its removal.

Will Payden spoke for the Early Intervention Services for children up to age three. He told the Committee that any cuts in early intervention would directly affect the level of therapy services to the children. He said that no one else in Ashtabula County could meet the needs of the children or had a mandate to provide early intervention services. "These kids need those services. If they didn't need them, they wouldn't be in the system."

Ash/Craft Director Larry Korland told the Board that 11 of the adults who had just a few months ago received services at Ash/Craft now received a lesser degree of help at home because of the cutback. He said that the program has grown 400 percent since he began there 20 years ago, and that the adults currently in the program need a much greater level of service.

According to Larry Korland, in 1976, none of the adults at the facility workshop needed help feeding themselves in the cafeteria or with other basic tasks. Now all of those adults are working in the community, and the adults at Ash/Craft need that level of assistance.

## **MR/DD Board Passes Budget**

December 25, 1997

Jefferson Gazette

The Ashtabula County Board of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities passed a budget last week at its December 16 Board meeting. The budget featured general fund appropriations totaling \$6.2 million, \$500,000 less than the 1996 budget. Superintendent Richard Cozza said that the \$500,000 reduction should allow the Board to cover 1997 expenses with existing revenue.

The majority of MR/DD cuts came from a reduction in staff approved at the previous board meeting. In addition to the \$400,000 cut in salary and associated costs. Superintendent Cozza proposed reducing board expenses by cutting back on physical and speech therapy contracted out by the Board. The Superintendent's other cost cutting proposals included shifting the cost of educating two school units, of 32 children, to the regular schools and having the regular school districts pay for the transportation of Happy Hearts students.

The December 16 Board meeting was the last for several MR/DD Board members. "This has been the best board I've worked with in the 17 to 18 years I've worked with boards. You're going to be missed and I'm proud to have worked with you," Superintendent Cozza said.

Jean Fields, President of the Board, in a telephone conversation said that in a story appearing in the December 11 Gazette, she was unfairly characterized as being "hostile" to the task force which is charged with reviewing the financial status of the Board. She said that the task force members met two weeks ago at Happy Hearts. "This is a good thing to bring the task force and new board members up to speed. We are an informed board. The superintendent inundates us with information every week."

Addressing the current situation where the MR/DD Board has had to lay off personnel in order to deal with the projected budget deficit, Jean Fields said "the situation is not one of mismanagement. We lost promised funding."

## **1998**

### **Health Care Savings Passed on To MR/DD Employees**

A story in the Jefferson Gazette dated July 1, 1998 by reporter Craig L. Hoffius reported that Happy Hearts teachers, teacher aides, Ash/Craft Workshop staff and bus aides-employees of the Ashtabula County Board of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities-approved a three-year tentative contract. The Board which also has to approve the contract, is expected to do so within the week.

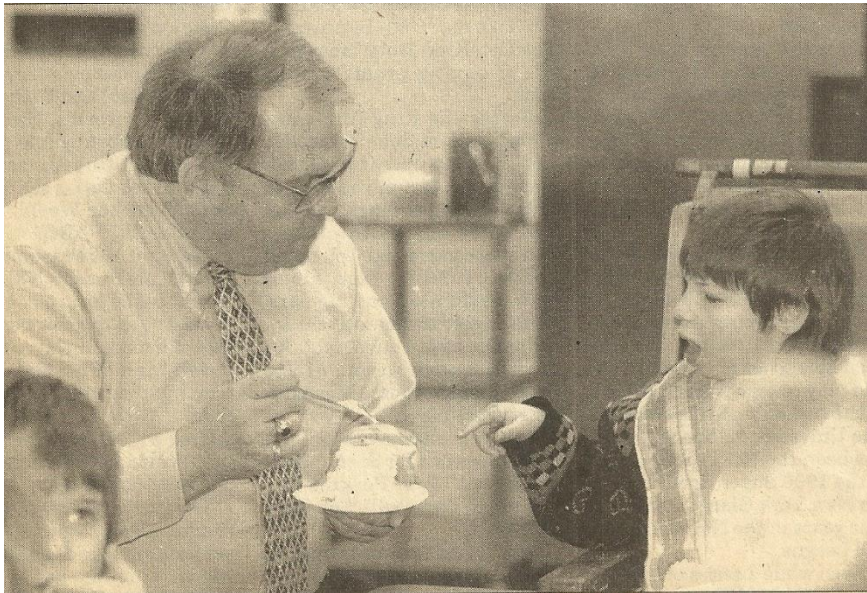
The new contract, affecting 105 Board employees, features raises in each of the three years. The raises will be five percent in each of the first two years and four percent in the third year. Negotiations with the employee's union, The Ashtabula County Employees Association for the Mentally Handicapped which is affiliated with the Ohio Education Association, began in the spring.

According to MR/DD Board Superintendent Richard Cozza, it has been a few years since these employees have had a raise and the five, five, and four percent raises in the three years of the contract were realized by making some changes in health care coverage. The changes included changing over to major medical and offering a preferred provider organization plan and a number of different plans, reducing the cost of health care coverage to the Board. He said that half of the amount of the raise resulted from health care cost savings. In computing the costs to the Board, he said that the three-year wage settlement would be \$856,470 over three years. The estimated three-year savings on health care coverage would be \$480,000, giving a net estimated cost of \$376,470 over three years. He noted that the salary change would have been the “net” amount without the change in health care coverage.

Superintendent Cozza said the Board planned to keep an eye on health care costs, “so down the road we’ll be able to track health care costs.”

## 1999

### Superintendent Cozza Resigns and Takes A Job in Toledo



*Saying Goodbye! Richard Cozza, Mental Retardation and Developmentally Disabled Superintendent, enjoys cake with Happy Hearts student Brittany Prince during a farewell party for Superintendent Cozza at the school on March 10, 1999. Ashtabula Star Beacon photo by Bill West.*

A story in the Jefferson Gazette by Craig L. Hofius dated March 10, 1999 provided details of Superintendent Cozza’s resignation from the Ashtabula County Board of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities. Superintendent Cozza resigned on February 18, 1999, after 13 years as Superintendent to take a new position as Executive Director of Community Living Options, Inc. in Toledo. He considers his new position in Toledo a step up in his career and probably his last job. His first day on the job in Toledo is scheduled to be March 22, 1999. The Ashtabula County MR/DD Board appointed Larry Korland, Adult Services Director, to be the interim superintendent, until it finds a replacement for Superintendent Cozza.

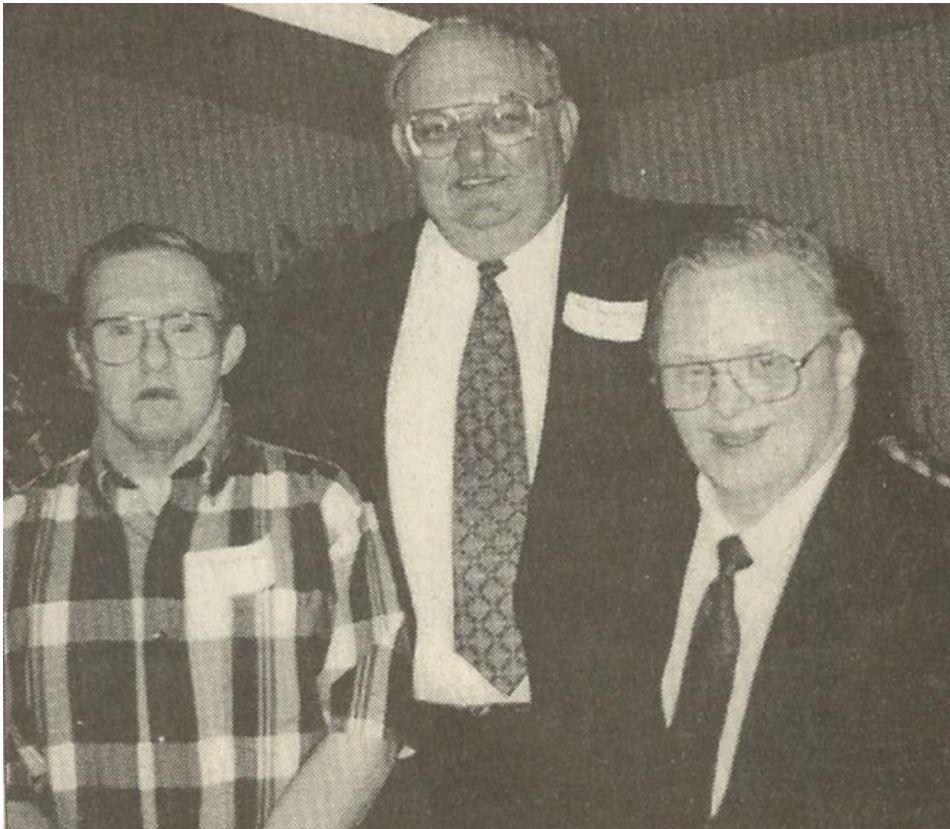


Richard Cozza grew up in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and started his career as a teacher in the MR/DD field in Baltimore. Later, he advanced to principal and also worked in Washington, D.C. and Indiana. "I think this is going to be my last move," he said.

Richard described Community Living Options as a private corporation affiliated with the Lucas County Board of MR/DD, responsible for residential development and programs and monitoring and quality assurance regarding the MR/DD population in Lucas County. He said that contrasted to Ashtabula County, some Ohio counties contract with a private company to provide services to the MR/DD population instead of providing them in the public domain.

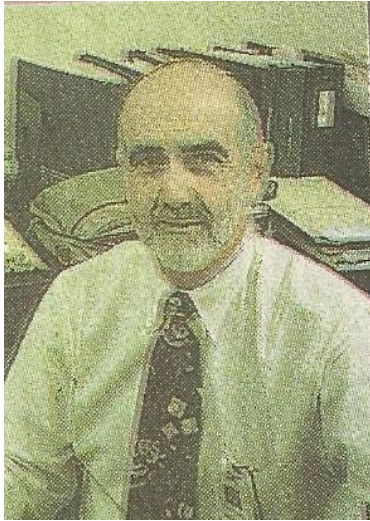
Reminiscing about conditions in the Ashtabula County when he first started with the MR/DD Board 13 years ago, Richard said that the services the Board offered were then very limited. He predicts that residential development would expand during the next five to ten years, because aging parents caring for disabled sons and daughters will no longer be able to care for them "like they used to do."

### **Ash/Craft Recognition Dinner**



*August 8, 1999. Ash/Craft Industries Board of Directors hosted a recognition dinner to honor Ash/Craft clients, customers and employers. Thirty-one clients who have worked at Ash/Craft for 25 or more years or have achieved successful community employment were honored and 18 employers and customers were recognized for their long-standing support of persons*

*with disabilities through Ash/Craft. Pictured are Dan Brunell and Larry Moroski, two of the award recipients, and Stephen Long, Ash/Craft Board President. Dan Brunell and Larry Moroski were students in the first class at Happy Hearts School.*



## **Larry Korland to Become Superintendent of Ashtabula County MR/DD Board**

In a Wednesday, November 3, 1999 story, Jefferson Gazette reporter Craig L. Hofius writes that in the spring of 2000, Larry Korland will no longer be Acting Superintendent of the Ashtabula County Board of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities, but Superintendent of the Board, approximately one year after Superintendent Richard Cozza resigned last February.

Ron Tate, president and spokesman of the MR/DD Board said that Larry Korland has been working for the Board over 20 years, and “we thought that the transition from Mr. Cozza would be smoother with somebody who was already in place and well respected. We anticipate in the springtime he’ll be named superintendent when he presents documentation to the board.”

The Ohio Department of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities requires superintendent certification to serve as a MR/DD board superintendent, and while Larry Korland had superintendent certification from the state, he let it lapse. He needs to update his certification by taking three graduate level courses and he intends to complete them as soon as possible.

Larry Korland has worked for the Ashtabula County MR/DD Board since 1976 and besides his duties as Acting Superintendent, he has headed the Ash/Craft Industries Program for several years as he does presently.

## Timeline, 1990s

1990

- First integrated basketball game with local varsity boys basketball team and Happy Hearts Varsity Basketball team. (St. John's H.S.)
- On-half mill additional levy passed to address students/clients now on waiting list.
- Supported Living Residential Services program begins.

1991

- Autistic Preschool Class was established.
- Medicaid funds available for specific client services.
- State definition of developmental disabilities changes, erecting new eligibility guidelines for changes, erecting new eligibility guidelines for children and adults.
- Finance Director position created.
- Finance operations computerized.
- International Special Olympic games in Minneapolis. Students/clients Jeff Schultz and Amy Turner competed in roller skating and Bob Stewart competed in powerlifting.
- National Special Olympic Winter Games in Steamboat Springs, Colorado. Five athletes competed.

1992

- Autistic school age classes established.
- First Valentine's dance with students crowned king and queen.
- First formal school prom held at Happy Hearts School.
- 2-mill replacement levy approved.
- School districts become responsible for services to 3-5 year olds.

1993

- St. John's satellite established for school aged students.
- Approval received for Ash/Craft expansion.
- The first strike in the history of the program by A.C.E.M.H. employees union which lasted six days.

1994

- The Early Intervention satellite in Andover is established.
- Park development is completed and turned over to Ashtabula County 169 Board. Dick Flower and Stan Gaumer were the driving force behind the completion of the PARK.
- The PARK complex total cost was approximately \$160,000 and not one cent of taxpayer money was used.
- Residential Department established.

1995

- The Conneaut Early Intervention satellite is established.
- Early Intervention classrooms now number five.
- Happy Hearts adds a Satellite Classroom at Wallace Braden Junior High School.
- Five local high school varsity basketball teams have now participated in integrated play with Happy Hearts varsity basketball team.
- The Leisure/Recreational Program now has a budget of \$4,000, and students participate in a variety of community activities.
- A.R.C. donates \$900 to adaptive physical education teacher for the purchase of a large adapted bike for handicapped students.
- Ash/Craft expansion begins.
- Bus fleet numbers 22 buses for 18 routes. Longest bus route is 220 miles a day. Total bus mileage per day is 1,740 miles.
- June 4, 1995. Happy Hearts teacher, Jodi Fowler, founded a program of students from Happy Hearts spending time at Ashtabula Catholic Middle School on West Sixth Street.
- 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Happy Hearts School founded by A.R.C.
- Present Caseload: School Program, 146; Workshop Program, 241; Community Employment, 10 = 397.
- 166 staff people employed by Ashtabula County Board of MR/DD.
- Programs general fund is \$6,900,000. Programs total funding is \$8,285,000.

1996

- November 26, 1996. Ashtabula County Commissioners appointed a special task force to investigate the Ashtabula County Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities Board program, intent on discovering how the agency racked up a \$700,000 deficit in the past year. The seven-member task force will meet and begin reviewing MR/DD records and interviewing staff.

1997

- The Ashtabula County Board of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities passed a budget featuring general fund appropriations totaling \$6.2 million, \$500,000 less than the 1996 budget. Superintendent Richard Cozza said that the \$500,000 reduction should allow the Board to cover 1997 expenses with existing revenue.

1998

- July 1, 1998. Teachers, teacher aides, Ash/Craft Workshop staff, and bus aides approve a three year tentative contract. Ashtabula County MR/DD Board approves the contract.

1999.

- February, 1999 Superintendent Richard Cozza resigns from the MR/DD Board to take a position in Toledo, Ohio.
- November, 1999. The Ashtabula County MR/DD Board names Acting Superintendent Larry Korland as new MR/DD Superintendent contingent upon updating his state certification.

## Special Stories: Journey Through Autism, Searching for Hope or a Small Miracle



*Michael Orlando, 3, checks out his surroundings at the Brave Builders Playground in North Kingsville. Ashtabula Star Beacon photo by Carl E. Feather. July, 1995.*

A July 30, 1995 series of stories by Ashtabula Star Beacon Life Style Editor, Carl E. Feather, explored the challenges, heartbreak, and glimmers of hope in the lives of parents and children with autism and the role Happy Hearts School played in their lives.

Joyce Kren, psychologist at Happy Hearts School, observed: “My gut feeling is that of all the disabilities a child could have, the family who is affected with an autistic child is probably the toughest to deal with. It affects the entire family system. Autism puts the entire family into chaos; it is always a crisis situation. The family of the autistic child has more needs than that of any disabled child.”

Richard Cozza, Superintendent of the Ashtabula County Board of Mental Retardation/ Developmental Disabilities added that “the mentally retarded child will fit into the routine of the family, but with autism the family fits into the routine of the child.”

Maria and Tony Orlando knew only too well what it was to fit their lives into the routines of their child, three-year-old Michael who was diagnosed with autism in September 1994. The doctors told the Orlandos that their son might not be able to talk or interact with them or other people. After the diagnosis, the Orlandos embarked on a self-education program, to learn all they could about autism and its many treatment theories. They started and raised money for a local autistic children’s foundation. They took Michael to Cleveland several times weekly for occupational therapy and a speech therapist came to their house. They had a nutrition consultant oversee Michael’s diet and they explored private behavioral therapy services.

Tony said, “Every available therapy that is age appropriate I am going to try it.”

Maria Orlando is living the truth of Superintendent Cozza’s observation that “with autism the family fits into the routine of the child.”

Maria is the mother and around the clock caretaker of her son, who must ensure that he has a schedule and routine that doesn’t vary. She said that if she veers from it, he gets stressed out and acts out. She has suffered through many screaming and tantrum episodes with her son in stores and restaurants. Michael’s “bratty behavior” was one of the many early signs of his autism. Maria noted that he wasn’t talking very well and when at age two, when someone talked to him he would scream like he wanted them to get away from him. When someone came to visit, Michael would shake their hand and then expect them to leave. While still a baby, he wouldn’t make eye contact with people and when someone made silly faces at him he would scowl instead of laugh. And most heartbreaking to his parents, he didn’t talk to them.

In October 1994, the Orlandos enrolled Michael in Happy Hearts School and they were very pleased with the school and its teachers. They felt that Michael progressed in his socialization skills and the Happy Hearts staff helped them deal with Michael’s behavior. “Learning the fact that he needs to be on a schedule and have a routine has really helped his behavior,” his mother Maria said.

Tony Orlando said Michael’s diagnosis has dramatically changed their lives. Friends who once visited with their children stay away because they don’t know how to deal with an autistic child. Others, including family members have grown closer to Michael as they learn the nuances of his autistic behavior. “An autistic child is like any other handicapped child. They just want to be loved. That’s all these kids ask for, they just want to know you care about them,” he said.

Fifteen years later in an Ashtabula Star Beacon story dated April 9, 2010, Staff Writer Karl E. Pearson wrote another story about Michael Orlando titled “Michael Orlando: Putting his best foot forward.”



*Jim Sanchez (left) commenting about Michael Orlando (right) “I’m so proud of our team and how they’ve really rallied behind him. It’s been a great experience for all of us. We learned a lot from him and he’s learned a lot from us.” Ashtabula Star Beacon photo by Warren Dillaway. April 2010.*



*Michael Orlando works on baton exchanges with the Edgewood track team. Ashtabula Star Beacon photo by Warren Dillaway.*

Members of the Edgewood High School track team in Ashtabula and senior teammate Michael Orlando, a sprinter for coach Jim Sanchez's squad, are a true teamwork team. In his second season with the Edgewood Warriors Michael has made strides to equal his sprinting prowess in living and advancing through his autism and his teammates have learned to appreciate everyday "normal" actions as gifts and not to take quite as much in their lives for granted. Both Michael and his teammates have experienced the growing opportunities in teammate interaction, developing levels of self-confidence and the benefits of teaching moments.

"It's definitely been an educational experience for us," Coach Sanchez said. "We always try and emphasize family around our program, and I definitely think Michael has not only become a part of our family, but we've all learned new lessons in what family means. We talk a lot about legacy, and not only making a better athlete but a better person. At first, we had to get used to Michael and he had to get used to us.

I'm so proud of our team and how they've really rallied behind him. It's been a great experience for all of us. We learned a lot from him and he's learned a lot from us."

Diagnosed with autism in 1994 when he was 2 ½ years old, Michael Orlando definitely feels he's profited from the experience. "I've enjoyed getting to know my teammates and kids from other schools, too," the 18-year-old said.

After spending his earlier years at Happy Hearts School, Michael's parents, Maria and Tony Orlando, enrolled him in kindergarten at McKinsey Elementary School in the Ashtabula Area City Schools system. His mother Maria said it took a lot of effort and persistence to help Michael prepare for school. She said her son underwent Applied Behavioral Analysis at home for several hours a day. "It took a lot of things like speech therapy and talking, learning objects and learning to work one-on-one. He's done a lot of work with an aide all along the way."

Eventually, the Orlando family moved to North Kingsville and his parents enrolled Michael and his now 14-year-old brother Stephen, a freshman tennis player at Edgewood, in Buckeye Local Schools. Michael started out in the seventh grade at Braden Junior High. Now a senior at Edgewood High School, Michael's aide, Debbie Wentworth helps him with the challenges of high school, including homework. "We're very happy with the Buckeye system," Tony Orlando said. "They've been so accommodating to Michael."

Both his parents and Michael think that he made the right decision in going out for track in his junior year at Edgewood. Track seemed to be a logical choice for Michael because he had already been in psychology, sociology classes and history classes with Coach Sanchez. “I thought I should do it because I needed to do an extracurricular activity,” Michael said.

Last year, Coach Sanchez placed Michael Orlando in the 100-and-200-meter dashes. At first Michael struggled to learn to get into the starting blocks. “In the beginning, it was hard for Michael to get into the blocks,” Maria Orlando said. “But Coach Sanchez and Michael’s teammates were very nice in working with him. They were never condescending.”

According to Michael, he was pretty nervous at first at his first indoor track meet at Kent State University, but once he got started he wasn’t nervous anymore. His favorite race is “the 100 because it’s over faster.”

Coach Sanchez and Assistant Coach Ed Dick and Michael and his parents decided to gradually work Michael into track meets and improving times. According to Coach Sanchez, he wanted to get Michael under 40 seconds in the 200, and he is already has been in the 36s twice. This season the coaches and Michael are aiming for somewhere in the 33s. Last year he ran the 100 in the 19s and already this year he’s down to the 15s. We’d like to see him get into the 13s. “It looks like we’re going to have to re-adjust Michael’s goals,” the Coach said.

Coach Sanchez said improving times is only a part of the package, and Michael’s times have improved, but so have his social skills. He gets along with all of his teammates, both boys and girls. Tony and Maria Orlando have appreciated Michael’s teammates too. “I think his teammates have learned a lot from this, too,” Tony Orlando said. “I think they’ve learned you shouldn’t downgrade anybody because they have a disability. Even though they may have a disability, they can compete.”

This year, Coaches Sanchez and Dick are considering expanding Michael’s duties, with the goal of getting him into some of the relays. Michael has been learning all the different kinds of handoffs in the relays. It took some time for Michael to get used to performing the work of a sprinter, but now he enjoys it. “When I first started out, it was hard work, but it’s not anymore,” he said.

Michael also has a unique perspective on running the sprints. He says that when he gets out of the blocks he feels like he is running through a wind tunnel. “Sometimes, I imagine I’m moving along and no one else can see me.” He also enjoys the satisfaction of a sprinter when he does it right, maybe even more than the typical competitor. He knows what he has to do to get it right, something that he quickly understood and doing it right makes him feel pumped up and a lot of confidence in himself.

Although crediting Coach Sanchez with helping him out the most, Michael also gives teammates and fellow seniors James Armeni and Tyler Wright with helping him reach for more goals. As he has gained more self-confidence, Michael has taken on other roles with the team, ones that



wouldn't necessarily be expected because of his autism. "I try and tell the freshmen how to do things the right way, things like opposite arm, opposite leg," he said. "I enjoy teaching the other kids." In some ways, Michael has taken on the role of an assistant coach. He takes pride in helping his teammates meet the academic standards to stay eligible for the team. Coach Sanchez said that every team member has to fill out grade cards every week for the coaches to check and Michael always reminds them to do their grade cards.

This year, in addition to enjoying Coach Sanchez's social studies classes, Michael has developed a new academic passion. He likes looking at maps in his geography class which Assistant Coach Ed Dick teaches. Coach Sanchez says proudly, "The teacher asked which lake is the largest lake in the world, and Michael told them the right answer, the Caspian Sea in Russia."

According to Coach Sanchez, Michael likes to take pictures at the track meets, commenting that "it's like something you can keep forever." "I took a picture of the sunset of our meet at PV with my cell phone camera," Michael said. He might be able to turn his love of photography into a livelihood. "I'd like to take photography classes," he said. "I'd like to do it somewhere around here."

His track experiences have taught Michael some long-term truths, too, and he wishes he could have done track for four years. "The model I want to live by is doing everything like it's my last time," he said. "When you get to college, you don't want to look back and say you wish you could do it over again."

Maria Orlando wishes Michael had started track as a freshman as well, but no matter how long his track career turns out to be, Coach Sanchez is positive about one thing, "Michael's a part of our track family," he said emphatically. "He always will be."

## Autism Facts & Stats-2010

- 1 percent of the population of children in the U.S. ages 3-17 have an autism spectrum disorder.
- Prevalence is estimated at 1 in 110 births.
- 1 to 1.5 million Americans live with an autism spectrum disorder.
- Fastest-growing developmental disability; 1,148 percent growth rate.
- 10 to 17 percent annual growth.
- \$60 billion annual cost.
- 60 percent of costs are in adult services.
- Cost of lifelong care can be reduced by 2/3 with early diagnosis and intervention.
- In 10 years, the annual cost will be \$200-400 billion.
- 1 percent of the adult population of the United Kingdom have an autism spectrum disorder.
- The cost of autism over the lifespan is 3.2 million dollars per person.

Autism Society of America

## Autism Facts & Stats-2015

- About 1 percent of the world population has autism spectrum disorder.
- Prevalence in the United States is estimated at 1 in 59 births.
- More than 3.5 million Americans live with an autism spectrum disorder.
- Prevalence of autism in U.S. children increased by 119.4 percent from 2000 (1 in 150) to 2010 (1 in 68).
- Autism is the fastest-growing developmental disability.
- Prevalence has increased by 6-15 percent each year from 2002 to 2010.
- Autism services cost U.S. citizens \$236-262 billion annually.
- A majority of costs in the U.S. are in adult services – \$175-196 billion, compared to \$61-66 billion for children.
- Cost of lifelong care can be reduced by 2/3 with early diagnosis and intervention.
- 1 percent of the adult population of the United Kingdom has autism spectrum disorder.
- The U.S. cost of autism over the lifespan is about \$2.4 million for a person with an intellectual disability, or \$1.4 million for a person without intellectual disability.
- 35 percent of young adults (ages 19-23) with autism have not had a job or received postgraduate education after leaving high school.
- It costs more than \$8,600 extra per year to educate a student with autism. The average cost of educating a student is about \$12,000.
- In June 2014, only 19.3 percent of people with disabilities in the U.S. were participating in the labor force – working or seeking work. Of those, 12.9 percent were unemployed, meaning only 16.8 percent of the population with disabilities was employed. (By contrast, 69.3 percent of people without disabilities were in the labor force, and 65 percent of the population without disabilities was employed.

Autism Society of America