



## News from THE WALLACE GROUP

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**ProAct, Inc.**

**Feature**

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### **LONGTIME GOODHUE COUNTY DIRECTOR FOUND LASTING VALUE IN HIRING PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES**

**Greg Schoener's 40 years in the industry were impacted early on by innovative  
programs providing work for people with disabilities**

When Winona-native Greg Schoener was a young social worker, in the early 1970s, he heard about a work program for people with disabilities opening up in Red Wing. Driven by curiosity, he traveled up river to get a look at an interesting new concept, a downtown storefront run by people with disabilities.

Leather hides were hung on display there, and craft kits were sold. These templates were used to make vests, mittens, gloves, moccasins and wallets. People from ProAct, then Interstate Rehabilitation Center, ran the cash register, stocked shelves and received further on-the-job training. The store also sold wine making supplies and was open for a couple of years, said Sally Ogren, director of programs and services for ProAct in Red Wing. The nonprofit has provided and sought out work opportunities for people with developmental disabilities and mental illness for some 40 years.

By the end of the 1970s, Schoener moved to Red Wing. Even at this time, many people with disabilities still lived in state hospitals. Group homes were just beginning. These are now the norm, and Schoener has long held a position as director of social services for Goodhue County.

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As the 1980s came in, work for people with disabilities was changing. Where the sheltered workshops common in the 1970s had these individuals working in separate facilities away from the general workforce, a move was on to integrate these workers in “community employment” settings. Early on, the change was termed “workshops without walls,” explained Schoener, who envisioned people with disabilities working for Goodhue County.

When he became supervisor of social services in the mid-1980s, Schoener said he decided to put his money where his mouth is. It began with a ProAct cleaning crew at the county, then expanded to include a clerical team which handled filing, copying, collating and other tasks. The variety of work turned out to be ideal for the individuals.

In 2007, the operation peaked with the addition of a document imaging project for multiple Goodhue County departments. People with disabilities were scanning paper files by the hundreds of thousands, starting with the public health, social services and the county attorney’s offices. The project, which employed multiple crew members, lasted more than a year. As one department started getting documents scanned, another would hear about the project and want the same, said Schoener.

The work involved a substantial amount of document separation, as files, notes, photos and stapled items had to be scanned separately from standard paper size sheets and stored in the correct electronic folders. Schoener helped lead the charge. “I could quite easily see that it was a proper task, a proper job that would fit perfectly with ProAct,” he said.

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Similar to the imaging crews, Schoener's clerical team from ProAct took pressures off of his line staff, allowing them to devote time to other tasks. From early on, the director had become attached to the ProAct teams. His interest was not accidental.

Inside his file full of contracts with ProAct, some dating back to 1986, he has a taped-in photograph of ProAct's crewmembers. "I keep the picture to remember the names of people," said Schoener. "You form friendships. They're my friends. They're fun to be around ... and have terrific personalities."

Ogren, with ProAct, said the work crews never would have gotten off the ground without Schoener's interest. Their experience continues to pay dividends, as Schoener recently added the public health department to their responsibilities. Recent changes brought about a merger between public health and social services.

The county director said ProAct crew members are part of the employee family, and are included in all staff special occasions. Early in ProAct's service, county staff members didn't all feel this way. Historically, when some complained about the ProAct crew sitting in the coffee room during breaks, Schoener put a stop to this talk immediately. They were a part of the team and had access to all employee privileges, he said. Staff attitudes soon took a turn for the better.

Fairness has been a strong point with Schoener, said Ogren. "He has been very even handed when any issues have come up." The county director notes the crews' work enjoyment, which has played out in its stability.

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“They look forward to it. They say that and express themselves,” Schoener said. Turnover has been minimal, with the same steady crew for the past four or five years, said Schoener. He knows of one individual who earlier lived in a state hospital for many years, but has been employed on a work crew for the past decade.

Who will carry the torch for people with disabilities after Schoener retires? “There will be others, parents, advocates ... who will step in and show an interest in promoting this type of a future for people with developmental disabilities,” Schoener said.

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