

W News from THE WALLACE GROUP

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Feature

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RETIRING PROACT MAINSTAY SAYS WORLD HAS CHANGED FOR PEOPLE WITH DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES OVER HIS FOUR DECADES AT NONPROFIT

Production Director Paul Rodewald has witnessed shifts to community-based housing, daytime work programs and community employment over his career in Red Wing

Most people with developmental disabilities in Minnesota were still housed in state institutions when ProAct's retiring Red Wing Production Director Paul Rodewald joined the fledgling nonprofit as a bookkeeper in late 1971, but the lives of people with disabilities would soon start to undergo significant change.

One of ProAct's predecessors, Interstate Rehabilitation Center (IRC), and others, started providing employment and life skills training during the daytime hours. To deliver services to people with disabilities in a community setting, rather than through state institutions, IRC's system of boarding homes was developed. These were followed by licensed foster homes and group homes which opened up additional community living choices for people with disabilities, explains Sally Ogren, director of programs at ProAct in Red Wing.

In 1971, IRC's offices moved from the laundry room at the old city hospital building to the Towerview Campus on U.S. Highway 61. At that time, there were 14 clients with disabilities and seven staff members. A year later, the 3-year-old nonprofit opened a retail store downtown.

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Rodewald kept the books and managed the operation, which sold leather accessories, wine and beer making supplies, boat model kits and other items. He put his two-year accounting degree to work, but Rodewald explained that IRC was teaching him much more about the nonprofit financial world than he ever learned in school.

The store eventually closed, but the number of people with disabilities being served would soon experience a dramatic jump in volume. Moves to close some state hospitals and shift people from institutions to community-based housing continued, as IRC expanded its network of boarding homes and semi-independent living arrangements. One example involved two men who were released from a state hospital to Goodhue County. They moved into an apartment, and were proud of their jobs and home, Ogren explained. “They were able to manage with intermittent help and supervision.”

Many individuals with disabilities who were born in the area returned, and others who lived with aging parents no longer able to care for them found needed services at ProAct. The introduction of school transition programs for young people with developmental disabilities also brought more participants to ProAct. Additionally, changes to nursing home systems further increased the number of people with disabilities living in the community, she explained. By the end of 2000, the transfer of all Minnesotans with developmental disabilities from the institutions to community-based residential settings was complete, according to the Minnesota Governor’s Council on Developmental Disabilities.

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Helping the business community to see ProAct as having value, versus being a charity, has been an emphasis from day one, Rodewald said. The group has been a labor source for many years, but wanted to stress the quality of its work and business-like practices. That's part of why the original Interstate Rehabilitation Center came to call itself IRC Industries in the early 1970s. "That put the emphasis on, it's more of a business, a company ... we wanted to downplay the nonprofit thing," he said. The strategy worked.

After its growing operation moved to the Towerview Campus on the city's northwest side, its space needs spread from one floor to three, according to Rodewald. As the mid-1970s neared, planning for a new building began. That's when the current structure in Red Wing's industrial park went up for sale. Some influential people resisted the idea for the location, but IRC Industries purchased the building and the arrangement has worked out very well, Ogren said.

The structure was about twice the size that was needed, said Rodewald, and people were asking what the nonprofit would do with all of the space. Just two years later, visionary planners were vindicated as the organization not only needed the space, but remodeled it to better accommodate its programs. A loading dock was added, front office space was expanded and, eventually, an addition that had seen several uses was converted to house IRC's Day Training and Habilitation Program.

Rodewald wore many hats at the expanding nonprofit, including accounting supervisor, sales and marketing representative and, by the 1980s, production management. Production revenues increased significantly every year through 2000.

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IRC Industries became ProAct after merging with a similar Eagan-based program, Owobopte, in 2003. Not long after, the woodworking department in Red Wing, which was making truckloads of wood pallets to send out daily, was closed in favor of less bulky projects.

Federal, state and local governments were driving a change to offer more programming to people with disabilities to better integrate them into the community, Rodewald explained. It began with mostly center-based or in-house work, but in the last 25 years, the push has intensified to get people into jobs in the community. As individuals with more skills found work outside of the ProAct's Red Wing production center, it became challenging to find qualified individuals and to get in-house jobs done in a timely manner, Rodewald said.

Starting out, a growing base of ProAct participants relied heavily on cooperation and partnerships with local industries, the retiring production director explained. Within 10 years, the production service area expanded from Red Wing to Lake City, Cannon Falls and Ellsworth, and River Falls, Wis.

Market conditions would drive business outreach even further. Companies began to move manual labor jobs to China, Mexico and other countries. "We had three or four companies leave within a year or two and that had a tremendous impact on our volume," Rodewald said. Market forces drove the nonprofit's reach to the Twin Cities, and ProAct in Red Wing now serves customers primarily from a 100-mile radius, but from as far as California and the United Kingdom.

The most rewarding part of Rodewald's lifelong career at ProAct has been to witness the group's success in placing people with disabilities in community jobs. People with limitations find meaningful work and become productive citizens, he explained. ProAct's impact is obvious as Rodewald frequently runs into people around town whom the nonprofit has helped.

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The work environment is also different from typical companies. Most of ProAct's clients are enthusiastic about coming to work and appreciate their jobs, so the nonprofit doesn't have some of the (attitudinal) issues that are normal at most companies. "You can't say enough about the staff on the floor," he said. "The dedication and the hard work they're involved with on a daily basis.

For the future, Rodewald is very optimistic. There are work opportunities that have yet to be found, as well as innovations and new equipment, he explained. Greater use of automation is expected. "There's no limit to the possibilities. It's wide open out there." In the near term, business sector challenges are expected to continue, and program funding and systems could see difficulties in the future, he said.

"Paul Rodewald has done much to build the performance and reputation of our organization in the Red Wing area, and we appreciate his dedication and commitment to serving people with disabilities, now and for the future," said Steven Ditschler, president and chief executive officer of ProAct.

Married and a resident of Red Wing, Rodewald is one of three children who grew up on a rural dairy farm in the area. The new retiree plans to spend more time with his grandchildren, and get out for more hunting and fishing.

ProAct is a 501 (c) 3 nonprofit corporation which has served the needs of people with disabilities and other challenges for 40 years. With facilities in Eagan, Red Wing, Zumbrota and Hudson, Wis., ProAct serves people from the Twin Cities, southern Minnesota and western Wisconsin.

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