

Sunshine CEO urges new expectations for people with disabilities

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Jason Abodeely, Sunshine Communities president and CEO, speaks during the Rotary Club meeting on March 16.

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For more than seven decades, Sunshine Communities has been at the forefront of serving some of northwest Ohio's most forgotten people.

Developmentally disabled individuals are "some of the most medically complex people," but their irrepressible zest for life has inspired providers nationally to refocus their mission, said Jason Abodeely, Sunshine Communities president and CEO.

To help illustrate his point, Mr. Abodeely told Rotary Club of Toledo members on Monday about a little girl who came to Sunshine on a ventilator, as many of Sunshine's residents do.

Over several years of therapy, the girl showed enough signs of improvement to gradually get weaned off the device.

She continued to make progress. Eventually, she gave staff the confidence to let her get on a school bus and attend school with other children.

That little girl who came to Sunshine struggling to breathe later joined a dance team and is finding joy participating in dance recitals. She is back to living with her family, reclaiming her life, Mr. Abodeely said.

Such anecdotes are rare, but they serve as a reminder of hope, he said during the Rotary luncheon inside the Glass City Center auditorium.

To Mr. Abodeely and other providers, the change began with a reckoning of what is possible.

“The expectations are that they deserve and can get back to society,” he said. “We don't necessarily want them to spend a life with us.”

That's a big change from the days when severely disabled children were institutionalized, often with parents told their loved ones had little hope of living out a long and productive life.

That institutional mindset, according to the Sunshine Communities website, is what motivated Roy and Georgette Engler to create Sunshine Children's Home in 1950.

The couple, which had five children with developmental disabilities, was appalled by what they saw inside state institutions they visited. They committed themselves to better serving children like their own.

In 1978, Sunshine opened the area's first family care home and expanded its Maumee campus to provide vocational training and other services.

Sunshine is one of only five organizations in Ohio licensed to provide the level of care it does, Mr. Abodeely said.

Those services are extended to 280 people a day, of which 19 require ventilators.

He said he is especially proud of the care provided to young children on ventilators, because “growing up in a hospital is not possible.” It's also not feasible for many families to provide that level of care, at least until children have improved enough to come home, he said.

“Most of the happiness that happens is because donors have invested in us, and our community supports us,” Mr. Abodeely said.

That sense of inclusion means getting kids out in the community and being “outward-facing by design,” he said.

“We are all better when we depend on each other mutually,” Mr. Abodeely said.

His talk was in conjunction with March being Developmental Disabilities Awareness Month.

“Our community is strong and, this month, deserves to be celebrated,” he said.

Dawn Bentley, who chairs Rotary's developmental services committee, said she likes how Sunshine “has built a work-force culture based on respect.”

“Simply put, Sunshine makes happiness happen,” she said. “[Mr. Abodeely] believes inclusion is not charity. It is community infrastructure.”

Larry Deitering, Lott Industries chief financial officer, said Mr. Abodeely's talk “means a lot to me personally” because of its message of inclusion.

“I feel his visit to us was very important and very enlightening,” said Donna Bogan, Rotary vice president.

Greg Fess, a retired lawyer, said Toledo is a better community because Sunshine serves people who would otherwise “fall through the cracks.”

“You know, hearing a talk from a guy like Jason — who operates a facility for kids who, through no fault of their own, were born with severe disabilities — just makes you realize how lucky you are and what important work he does,” Mr. Fess said.