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POPULAR

Rise Inc. marks 50 years serving people with disabilities

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Jan 16, 2022



When Loring Tollefson was 16 years old, his parents had concerns about his future.

Born with intellectual disabilities, he faced limited prospects at a time when many disabled people in Minnesota ended up in institutions, away from family and friends.

His parents, Chester and Gladys Tollefson, wanted him to have opportunities for a fulfilling life instead of being shut away in an institution.

“There was the institution at Cambridge, but we thought Loring was better physically than to be involved in Cambridge, just sitting and doing nothing,” Chester Tollefson said in a recent profile published by Rise. “I thought, ‘There’s things he can do.’”

Working together with community leaders in Anoka County, the family helped create Rise, Inc., a Spring Lake Park-based nonprofit. It opened its doors Aug. 2, 1971, serving four people with disabilities.

Half a century later, Rise provides employment and enrichment services to more than 3,000 people a year at 26 locations in Minnesota, including the original Spring Lake Park site, which serves as its headquarters.

In August it kicked off a yearlong celebration of its 50th anniversary and is featuring “50 stories for 50 years” on its website. As of Jan. 10, it had posted 16 stories.

For Rise President Lynn Noren, who started with the organization as an intern 43 years ago, the time has flown, but the change has been monumental.

“There really weren’t a lot of vocational rehabilitation programs in Minnesota” when Rise began, she said, noting that the organization predates many special education laws.

“Back in the day, people with disabilities were really treated as very special, and so they weren’t involved in regular community life,” Noren said.

She believes groups like Rise played a key role in helping family and community members view people with disabilities as simply people who have different abilities and strengths.

“To be able to support them in having careers and learning through employment, ... that’s a big deal,” Noren said. “That’s very fulfilling.”

Over the years, Rise expanded its services. It now offers community-based and center-based employment services, mental health housing support, rehabilitative mental health services and more. It also provides social and recreational opportunities. Clients include people who have a wide range of disabilities, as well as people with mental illness, refugees, immigrants and those climbing out of poverty. Prior to the pandemic, it employed almost 500 staff members.

“It is just really amazing how things have changed,” Noren said, noting that in the ‘80s and ‘90s, rapid government policy changes boosted the work of Rise and similar organizations.

But the success didn’t come without hard work.

“Part of why we grew so rapidly was we were opportunistic,” Noren said. “We always say we were scrappy in looking for funding opportunities and ways to support more and more people.”

She said the thousands of businesses that have partnered with Rise are critical.

“We can’t do anything at Rise without our partners,” she said.

The organization relies on donations and government funds to operate.

Even after 50 years, Rise co-founder Chester Tollefson is still involved. Loring Tollefson died in 2002, and Gladys Tollefson died in 2013. But Chester still attends the annual gala in his late 90s.

Noren said sometimes it takes passion to accomplish something meaningful, and Tollefson has passion.

“He is certainly a shining example of that, just really committed to having a place where Loring could work and have the same kind of life that his other kids did,” Noren said.

She said Chester was also good at bringing people together and knew the right people to bring together in Anoka County.

Bringing the community together is still at the core of Rise's work, Noren said.

"We really help people connect with their community, and that's at the heart of all that we do," she said. "And we do that one person at time. ... It's really important that our services happen one person at a time, and every support looks different based on what someone's strengths and needs are."

Learn more about Rise at rise.org, and keep up with the "50 stories for 50 years" at tinyurl.com/2p8dfh7f.

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