

EASING THE CHALLENGE

Behind one local organization's mission to uplift disabled Milwaukeeans.

BY LAUREN SIEBEN | PHOTO BY DAVID SZYMANSKI

When a group of Milwaukee-area families came together to form Life Navigators in 1949, they were — perhaps unknowingly — on the cutting edge of the disabilities advocacy movement.

“Those founding families developed the framework for community-based services for kids and adults with disabilities,” says Vicki Wachniak, executive director of Life Navigators. “They were really ahead of their time. Back in 1949, most individuals [with disabilities] went into some kind of institutional care.”

Today, Life Navigators continues to work toward its mission of improving the quality of life for physically and mentally challenged adults and children.

The organization's services — which include job trainings, volunteer outings and social gatherings — promote inclusion in the community for people with disabilities. The nonprofit also provides corporate guardianship and care management for individuals who don't have a caretaker to make critical decisions regarding their health and safety.

One of the organization's fastest-growing services is its trust program, which allows families to set aside money for a loved one's long-term care. A trust can offer a sense of security both for the beneficiary and for that person's family. “It really provides peace of mind that once the main caregiver may no longer be around, there's a financial plan in place for their loved one's future,” Wachniak says.

Mike and Ginny McBride of Brookfield opened a trust through Life Navigators after their granddaughter, Allison, was born with 5P-Syndrome. Approximately 50 to 60 children in the United States are born with 5P- each year, according to the Five P Minus Society. The rare condition leaves children with lifelong physical and developmental disabilities.

One of the features of 5P- is the inability to swallow, Mike explains, and so Allison, who is now 9 years old, relied on a feeding tube until she was 18 months old. Today, Allison has surpassed expectations physically — she can run, jump and swim like other kids her age — but she will always lag behind her peers intellectually.

Beyond facilitating Allison's trust, Mike says Life Navigators will be an important part of Allison's ongoing care, helping her parents and eventually her older sister, who will, one day, be Allison's legal



guardian. “We're getting a lot of comfort knowing she's going to be in great hands with Life Navigators involved,” Mike says.

Allison has also befriended other children with disabilities through game nights and outings to the Mequon Nature Preserve and local sporting events. These social interactions are just as important for kids as they are for adults, Wachniak notes.

“We often hear from families whose loved ones participate in these programs that they've started to see their confidence and self-esteem grow,” she explains.

Life Navigators also offers a lifeline to caregivers. This year, the organization began hosting Coffee Connections, a monthly meeting for older caregivers to connect with each other and discuss long-term care, trusts and guardianship options for their loved ones.

Although Life Navigators has been a mainstay in the community for nearly 70 years, Wachniak says the nonprofit still works hard to spread awareness of its services and its mission. “We always think families are connected to services, but it's ongoing that we get a call from a hospital or neighbor,” she says. “Part of our work is always being out in the community at different events to spread the word of our work and to help families get connected.” MKE