

Orinda Resident Making a Difference: Unique Program Opens Doors for Developmentally Disabled Adults

By Jennifer Wake



RES SUCCESS founder Ian Bremner stands next to student's artwork displayed along the walls of the Pleasant Hill facility

Photo Jennifer Wake

Most parents breathe a sigh of relief when their child turns 18. But for parents of children with a developmental disability or mental retardation, the 18-year-old milestone can mean a turbulent transition from the safe haven of a school district's special education program to the uncertainty of adult services offered by the state.

And finding placement can be difficult, especially if your child has severe behavioral problems.

These issues were clear to Orinda resident Ian Bremner, who set out to make a difference. In 1994, he founded RES SUCCESS – a non-profit day-treatment program serving behaviorally-challenged adults with a dual diagnosis of mental illness and developmental disabilities – thanks to two grants he received from the Regional Center of the East Bay.

“We work with mild, moderate severe and profoundly disabled individuals: some who need help with grooming and hygiene, toileting and eating; others who might break things or hurt themselves,” Bremner said, who has worked with the Association for Retarded Citizens (ARC), the Opportunity for Independence (OFI) and Behavioral Counseling and Research Center (BCRC), and is a member of the Contra Costa County Developmental Disabilities Council. “Our population would not be able to survive without these types of services.”

Unfortunately, due to their behavioral problems, Bremner says many of RES SUCCESS' students have been demitted from other programs. Through his program's unique approach, Bremner and his staff have seen once despondent and depressed individuals become engaging, even joyful.

When Mike – one of the Pleasant Hill facility's students – came to RES SUCCESS, he was suffering from severe depression after being disciplined at other institutions for his behavioral problems. The staff suggested he use exercise as an outlet to express his frustrations.

“He loves to lift weights now. It has really built his confidence,” Bremer said. Mike now does his weight lifting poses with the staff and will come up to visitors to proudly share his latest accomplishments. “What's unique about our behavior modification programs is we view behavior as a form of language. We believe a lot of these individuals know what they are doing. Every behavior is a request for help – they're lashing out because they're scared, hungry or

frustrated.”

The program utilizes art to pull people out of difficult situations, giving them a new focus as they work through their problems toward a resolution.

“Art is so expressive – you can't do it wrong,” Bremner said. “You can get to people's emotional state and pull them out of a behavior.”

Pleasant Hill facility manager Sandie Shields has seen how the use of art can help diffuse a situation. “Art can be very soothing; the rhythm calming. And when they're engaged in the art room, there is no need to establish eye contact and there are no negative consequences. We can remove them from the situation without seeming hostile.”

In addition to expressive arts, RES SUCCESS also offers individual and group therapy, vocational training, an education curriculum, communication skills support, and daily living activities. Assistant Program Manager Megan Finley develops individual education plans for each of the 47 students at the Pleasant Hill facility, ensuring that the student's work is not too difficult, but not too easy either. “I have to make sure I keep the students happy; I can't overwhelm them,” she said.

“We believe we can reduce maladaptive behaviors to help these individuals to live as independently as possible and find goals specific to match their dreams, such as having a job or living independently with friends,” Bremner said.

Now with five locations (two day-treatment facilities, two residential programs in Martinez, and a new day-treatment facility in Pleasant Hill), the organization serves nearly 95 individuals between the ages of 18 and 59 from areas throughout the East Bay, including Lafayette and Moraga. Bremner hopes to open a new facility next year, and plans to expand to Danville and Pleasanton with a goal of serving 250 students within the next five years.

Most importantly, Bremner doesn't want to lose sight of those most in need – the ones he says fall through the cracks.

“Our clients are incredible teachers – they teach kindness, compassion, and how to live in the moment,” Bremner said. “When you see the people we serve express themselves, it changes everything. Serving these individuals is a dream come true.”

For information about RES SUCCESS, you can visit its Web site at: www.ressuccess.org.