



## *Giving People With Disabilities Permission to Dream*

By Gracia Swenson

“At first, we just wanted to living in Northern Minnesota and make a living,” says Wendy Annis. She and her husband Jim own and operate Trillium Services, Inc., a community living and family services provider; Trillium Works! Inc., a supported employment provider; and Paragon Associates, Inc., which builds accessible homes for the individuals they serve.

Jim and Wendy met when they were both working in St. Paul for service providers for people with disabilities. They married in 1987 and had a common desire to live in Northern Minnesota. Having worked in the direct service profession for more than fifteen years, Wendy and Jim had innovative ideas for providing person-centered services for people with developmental disabilities. They presented their ideas to St. Louis County, enlisted the backing and advocacy of area case managers, and convinced the County to begin referring clients to them.

In 1992, with four adult clients, the Annis' founded Paragon Services, Inc.

They ran the business out of their family home for the first two years. In addition to providing in-home support services for clients living in their family home, they developed programs and training for clients to gain independence, living skills and connections to the community. In 1995, they opened their first home for two clients who wished to begin living independently.

Over the next five years, the business doubled in size. Today, Trillium manages eighteen Community Living homes throughout Duluth and Hermantown. Additional 47 clients receive family support services, and thirty clients partner with the Trillium Works! program for employment support services.

The company has 220 employees, the majority of whom are direct service professionals. The management team has grown to 39, including Wendy as Executive Director and Jim as the Business Administrator.

The agency headquarters are in large, inviting offices, full of color and energy. Every visitor is greeted by Frida and Quincy, the Annis' two full-size poodles who come to the office every day, sit in on meetings, and bring effective resolution to tense situations.



### **Person-Centered Approach**

The Trillium philosophy of service to people with disabilities differs from the traditional approach, where individuals are placed into vacancies in already-existing homes. Instead, Trillium works to the wishes of the client through a person-centered planning process and develops homes that best fit her/his needs. Through this approach, Trillium has earned a reputation in the community for being able to work out successful solutions for difficult clients, persons in crisis, and those who have not been able to live with other people.

Every client referred to Trillium goes through a planning process called PATH (Planning Alternative Tomorrows with Hope). The clients invites a team of family, friends, and advocates who know him/her, and together with the Trillium staff, they develop a profile and a creative and personal guide to achieve the client's goals. "We try to reach for dreams," says Wendy.

Client homes are small, typical homes that blend into neighborhoods. Of the eighteen current homes, seven are rental properties, one is client-owned, four were built by Paragon to be handicapped accessible, and the remaining six were purchased by an investor in the Twin Cities who leases the property back to Trillium. The agency also uses several apartments in the area as transitional housing while they create the ideal situation for every individual.

Wendy and Jim attribute some of their success to the emphasis they place on training in independent living skills, recreation, leisure activities, and socialization. Clients are integrated into the community through employment, education, and volunteer and social opportunities. The focus is on helping individuals explore their options, follow their passions, create meaningful relationships, and give back to the community.

The Trillium Task Force, for example, is a client-directed group that provides opportunities for community service. Recent projects include collecting aluminum cans for Habitat for Humanity, cleaning up a local park, and collecting trash along the Lakewalk. Nature Rocks! is another club which provides opportunities for clients to interact with and learn about the environment.



### **Maintaining High Standards**

In May 2004, Trillium Services became the only Minnesota community living agency outside of the Twin Cities to receive a three-year accreditation from CARF, the Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities, along with two exemplary awards. The highlights of the CARF report noted the quality of life maintained for clients through the person-centered approach, and the relationships between clients and the service staff.

Jim thinks that the residents of St. Louis County don't realize the high quality of social services here. He has worked with other counties throughout the state, and for their size, St. Louis County "does a good job." But the County doesn't always have the means to start up services. "We will always provide for St. Louis County. We never dreamt of an organization this big. The need for service is high, and we are willing to meet the need."

As the Executive Director, Wendy is in charge of program operations. She continues to train employees in the mission, vision, and values of the organization. She tells the personal stories and communicates their passion for their work.

Jim jokes that his degree in Studio Arts and Art History didn't prepare him to be a business administrator, but he believes that "the creative component is important for entrepreneurs. You can hire the technical stuff"

Wendy and Jim have a leadership style and an openness with their employees that keeps them close to the information and stories that are important to meeting the needs of clients. Jim says, "It's not about Jim and Wendy. Our clients are our customer."

Wendy adds, "We try to figure out the right thing to do, and then we do the right thing"♦