

Earl Walden Award for Outstanding Achievement in Rural Advocacy – 2007

Post Missoula Conference Newsletter article

Joyanna Geisler Interview -

Describing herself as “pretty shy,” Joyanna Geisler says she was honored yet embarrassed when she received the Earl Walden Award for Rural Advocacy this year. “I didn’t know until I opened the program and saw my name,” and “it was extra special when I found out at the banquet that Betty (Walden) didn’t know either.” Betty said, “I was so proud to see my friend’s name as this year’s award winner.”

Originally from Wyoming, Joyanna taught special education in Montana for a few years before striking out for Alaska. This country gal taught in Anchorage for awhile, but after visiting some friends in Homer, population 5500, she decided to stay. In 1986, a friend encouraged her to apply for a small IL services grant and receiving it, she began to provide IL services through a local mental health center. When federal regulations required CILs to have 51% people with disabilities as staff and board members, Joyanna decided to open the Kenai Peninsula IL Center. In 1991, she was the only employee (part time), had a \$30,000 budget and did fee for service activities for VR. Seeing a rough future ahead without more funding, she soon became a member of the SILC and started advocating for dollars for the state.

Joyanna says her personal IL journey has evolved from living on the grounds of a State Training School where her father worked and seeing the good, the bad and probably the ugly of how disability was handled back then, to being the director of a very rural CIL with two satellites, a great staff and a budget of around \$900,000. “As a kid, I remember seeing people of all ages with severe disabilities all the time. One young man in particular spurred my interest as he was a resident, but ran farm machinery and became almost part of the staff. I began to see what someone could do if given the chance. I think IL was in my blood before I even knew what to call it.”

With personal values that have always been to fight for the underdog, Joyanna says “I just naturally want to see people treated equally and have a fair shot. Several years ago I got a referral from a mental health counselor 175 miles from Homer who knew of a non-verbal, non-ambulatory young woman who wanted out of the nursing home where she was living. Among other things, nursing home staff had locked her communication board in a closet and wouldn’t allow her a power wheel chair. I started going there once a month, got her board released and found her a power chair, then continued to visit for nearly a year. What the woman’s mom and I were doing was soon recognized by the town’s people (with a population of only 3500, you get recognized fast) and we helped change the service systems in the community and got her out. Once you taste that kind of success, and you see what you can do, it makes it easier the next time. I’m incredibly stubborn – don’t like to be told NO, so that was just the beginning.”

Today, “we have a couple of new programs that I’m really proud of,” says Joyanna. TALENTS prepares young people for employment through a curriculum that teaches them about productivity, decision making, problem solving and work place attitude. Many will not get a high school diploma, but will have a Certificate of Employability if they complete the program.

Joyanna says she had to be convinced that the second program was a good idea. Their TRAILS program is all about inclusive recreation. At first, she thought it was “fluff” until she heard some young people at an APRIL conference talking about skiing down a mountain in Alaska. One skier, who happened to be deaf and a little person, said “If I can ski down that mountain, I can do anything.” Now in its third year of providing opportunities for young people with many kinds of disabilities to go kayaking, skiing, fishing, camping and taking river float trips, Joyanna says she has “seen more giant steps to empowerment than any peer counseling or skills training might do. These can be life changing experiences for some people.” One camper who has some serious mental illness issues plus a strong anxiety disorder returned from a weekend camping trip grinning from ear to ear and telling Joyanna, “I can’t remember the last time I was treated like a human being like that.”

When asked what she saw for the future for people with disabilities, Joyanna explained that “I don’t see the future being much different from the past or the present. Even with new technologies, a person who

acquires a disability still has to face it and become comfortable with their new self. That will never change and we all know going in that our society devalues anyone or anything that's different, so attitude is still our biggest challenge. When I see young people being more accepting of disability, it is heartening; so maybe it won't be quite so hard for the next generation.

Congrats! Joyanna!! Keep up the GREAT work!

More about Joyanna...



Nominated by her Statewide Independent Living Council, Joyanna Geisler (left) is said to have a “can do – no nonsense” attitude about Independent Living.

Joyanna Geisler fell in love with Homer, Alaska and adopted the small town of just over 5,000 people. In 1992, she started the Kenai Peninsula Independent Living Center (KPILC) whose service area is called the Gulf Coast of Alaska. Her core service area is the Kenai Peninsula, with outreach to Kodiak Island and Prince William Sound communities. The entire region could be classified as rural as it consists of only a handful of towns with a population of 4,000 or more. In total, there are 74,611 persons in her service region spread out across an area roughly the size of the state of Wisconsin.

In the beginning and for a few years to follow, Joyanna did the work of several people. The Center grew incrementally as she tirelessly advocated for additional resources with DVR and the SILC to serve her area. Today, KPILC is a well respected agency, with offices in 3 communities, 7 employees and a 2008 budget of \$705,000.

Working to transition consumers out of nursing homes is one of Joyanna's passions. Nursing home administrators in her area are never happy to see her coming in to work with a consumer that wants out because they know she will succeed. She and her staff are experienced in advocating on behalf of individuals with disabilities and work tirelessly to help acquire the services and benefits to which individuals are entitled and that will allow them to move back into their communities. Recognized as the most experienced benefits planner in the state, Joyanna regularly shares her knowledge by mentoring other centers to help keep consumers from slipping through the cracks. To ensure a transition is safe and successful, the KPILC team works closely with families and individuals, nursing home and long-term care staff as well as medical treating professionals.

Under Joyanna's leadership, KPILC has been instrumental in affecting disability policy on both a state and federal level. As a systems advocate, Joyanna chaired the statewide committee that brought consumer-directed personal assistance services to thousands of Alaskans. She also has led the charge to get her fellow directors and the SILC to work together, share information and leverage the power of IL into a force to be reckoned with!

The transportation voucher program that Joyanna instituted is one of the finest examples of a consumer-controlled program in existence in the state. In conjunction with the Alaska Department of Transportation and area taxi companies, KPILC offers a voucher system that pays consumers' cab fares for transportation to doctor's visits, shopping or just for mobility. This is one of the most popular of the Center's programs, having fewer restrictions than many transportation programs and allowing users to decide when and how they will use their “ride”.

KPILC maintains a presence in the Peninsula schools by offering youth with disabilities and other high risk kids the opportunity for intensive training in basic work skills. Students learn the importance of appearance, punctuality, and accountability in the work place. Joyanna and her staff work with local Chambers of Commerce to introduce participants of the TALENTS program to area employers and offer employers a guarantee that program participants are well acquainted with expectations in the workplace.

Other programs KPILC supports include:

- Community Closets, with an extensive inventory of accessibility items for rent, loan, or sale including mobility items, small household appliances, electronics, and other items with an innovative rent-to-own component designed to enhance independence.
- Home and business modifications as well as advice and cost-effective methods of barrier removal, and a new favorite recently started by Joyanna,
- T.R.A.I.L.S. — Total Recreation and Independent Living Services providing recreation programs that are designed to support individuals with disabilities in the community doing what they like to do with friends & family.

Nominated with pride and admiration of her as a rural CIL director, SILC ED, Patrick Reinhart says, “I cannot imagine a more deserving advocate and harder worker when it comes to promoting IL in rural Alaska.”

APRIL is proud to present this year’s Earl Walden Award to Joyanna Geisler

-- Congratulations Joyanna!!