



Executive Suite: Michael Smith, of ACDS

By: Christine Giordano

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Photo credit: Newsday / Audrey C. Tiernan | Michael M. Smith, executive director of the Association for Children with Down syndrome on the school's playground. (Aug. 27, 2012)

Michael Smith came to ACDS in Nassau County when its school was half full, and the organization that helps children with Down syndrome and other disabilities was months away from going broke.

Having worked for New York Mayor John Lindsay's administration in various roles and in numerous other agencies, Smith, the executive director, used his financial and political acumen to transform ACDS, based in Plainview, into something viable.

Smith persuaded his board to extend agency services to the growing populations of autistic and disabled children. He also asked the state what it needed from schools like his, pared down his administration and began programs to work with infants from birth since children with Down syndrome often cannot nurse or drink a bottle properly.

Despite state cutbacks, the ACDS budget grew from \$6.5 million in 2004 to \$15 million, and now funds some group homes without government help and raises \$1 million each year for its preschool special-education program, its school for 270 kids, respite services for clients 5 to 21 years old and a multitude of other services. Most money comes from federal, state, county and local government sources, Medicaid and fees.

Besides opening the agency to other services and disabilities, what methods did you use to turn ACDS around?

I went back and read three or four years of board minutes and found out that the board was not getting regular and timely or even accurate financial information. . . . I brought in my own CFO. . . . I spent a lot of time in Albany working with local legislators, being active in industry groups, spending time, you know, networking and schmoozing and, obviously, that helps with your fundraising.

How did your financial background help you?

In the past, they only wanted social workers or program people for those jobs until nonprofits realized, 'We need to run an efficient business.'

You grew 9 percent each year for the past eight years. What's your advice on growing during cutbacks?

There are a lot of very talented nonprofit leaders on Long Island, but some nonprofits started cutting and pulling back when the economy got bad . . . they should've remained aggressive. That's what we've tried to do. . . . We're developing a group home with no cost to the state and part of it is to show that you're willing to make a good partner.

If people with disabilities are now living beyond their parents, and the state isn't boosting funding, what does the future hold?

You solve the issues case by case. I think that maybe we have to find ways to support people longer at home. There are models in other states that we've been looking at as a private agency, and New York State has been looking at a test model where there's almost a foster care model.

CORPORATE SNAPSHOT

Name: Michael M. Smith, executive director, ACDS, Plainview

What this group does: Lifetime support to individuals with Down syndrome, autism and other developmental and to their families.

Employees: 250 full time, 50 part time.

Roles they play: Staff works either in preschool or in adult residential, day habilitation, and MSC programs.

Revenue: \$15 million