

# ACDS Newsletter Summer 2024

## An Interview with ACDS Chief Executive Officer Michael M. Smith

*As ACDS celebrates 20 years of his leadership, we sat down with ACDS CEO Michael M. Smith to discuss his tenure with the agency, some of his favorite memories and where he sees our future.*

### Can you speak to the state of the agency when you began your time here in 2004?

Looking back now it is clear how much the agency was struggling when I arrived and how close it was to the precipice of not surviving. The agency was losing money year after year. I always thank the Board because they were very honest with me. They gave me a very honest backdrop of the previous three-to-four years, about previous execs, they handed me the financials. The board president, Craig Lomma, was himself the father of a kid in the program and had stepped in as exec. He was essentially running the agency. I shared the information with some execs I knew back in Connecticut and they thought the agency wouldn't make it the next 90 days and looking back it was probably pretty close to that. They had a budget of \$6.125 million and were on track to



lose \$600,000. I got that down to \$200,000, then the next year we had a small surplus and we were on our way.

I remember working with the head of SED, who I knew from a previous agency. He walked me through changes I could make on the school side, making changes to administration, increasing our billing and productivity. When he saw the positive direction we were going in, he helped us with our rates.

It is important to note that the programs were always good. The school was half empty. We were serving only students with Down syndrome and some mild speech impairments. We were not yet serving any children on the autism spectrum. I give a lot of credit to Jane Shimkin, who began serving children with autism in her Early Intervention classes. But we didn't yet have SED programs that could serve them, which was terrible. The parents were very upset. Jane and I put together a presentation for our board and ultimately we decided that this was the way we had to go, for our families and for the agency. There was no other way to fill the school and the future of the agency was at stake. We saw that we could easily adapt our expertise serving children with Down syndrome to naturally serve children with other disabilities. It was a seamless way to move the agency forward.

ACDS believes that All Children Deserve Success and is committed to services that will follow children throughout their lives and into their adult years.



## What did the adult services side of the agency look like at the time?

On the adult services side, at the time we had 5+ and four group homes (Seaford, Merrick, Freeport and Wantagh). It was headed up by Linda Sperber, who had created the adult services program for us. We were trying to grow adult services and in my first six years we added four additional group homes (Horatio, West Loines, Hellenos and Albertson). This looks especially remarkable from where we sit today, with new residential growth now really frozen. We started the Program Without Walls in 2010, which now serves over 150 individuals. It was designed to serve new high school grads who aged out at 22. We developed a huge and very successful Medicaid Service Coordination program, which the state ended up closing in 2016. That was a big part of our growth. Adult Services is run now by Erica Lepurage, who is great at seeing where the trends are, being responsive, and always keeping our people and their needs front and center.

## What has been your relationship with the board over the years?

Something I am very grateful for is that I have always had the support of our board. When I got here we had a

seven member board and six were parents of students in the school. We expanded it and tried to make it more balanced between family members and people from the community who could support us in different ways. In my early years our president was Craig Lomma, then Tim Michel followed by Gene Kirley, and now Tiana Jones. I always worked closely with the board president and all our past presidents are still closely involved in the agency to this day. Collaboration between management and the board is something we do very well.

## What keeps you excited for the future of ACDS?

Part of my philosophy is that if an agency is static, it dies. What keeps me going is that there are more people who need our services. When he was Board President, Tim Michel said to me one time: “what I want you to do is if there are people who need a service from us and we know how to do it – go for it.” I still think that way. If it’s needed and consistent to our mission and we know how to do it, we pursue it. The opportunities present themselves. I didn’t go looking for Westchester; Westchester found us.

For a while ACDS was like the best kept secret in the world. I had lived in Plainview and I knew nothing

ACDS believes that All Children Deserve Success and is committed to services that will follow children throughout their lives and into their adult years.





about ACDS. One of the reasons I became active in the industry groups is to carry the message of the agency. In Scarsdale, a priest I had worked with in the Bronx moved to Westchester and had a new parish with an empty school building. We met with the County and the rest is history. I couldn't believe how overwhelming the need was there. You have to be open to those opportunities. You don't want to be stale and stagnant. Not every lead pans out but some do and it creates opportunities.

Take the Hellenos home. My mom was Greek American and this mattered to me a lot. Manny Katsoulis came to me. He headed a Greek liturgical program at his parish in Roslyn and he came up with the idea of a group home to serve people with Greek ancestry. I brought it to the regional director of OPWDD and she was supportive. We were off to the races! Twice the Greek Archbishop came and blessed the house. That was tremendously meaningful. These people have been going to church together and have been friends for years and that's really the same model Linda Sperber used to develop West Loines. The 6 original residents were friends who wanted to live together.

Our Albertson house was supposed to be developed by another agency. The parents had been advocating state officials and we got called and asked to take on the project. We did not have experience serving adults with autism in a residential setting but our reputation was good and we were known for doing good work so we decided to expand our reach. It doesn't mean there won't be challenges; there are. But in each case I just

mentioned -- Scarsdale, Hellenos, Albertson -- we were known in the field for doing great work. Those to me are some things that I look back on fondly and am very proud of.

In terms of what keeps me going, there is a picture of me and a little girl named Eloise at graduation in Scarsdale, that really says it all. One of the things I'm proudest of is when we are able to admit students who really couldn't be served someplace else. There have been a couple of times I can think of where we took a child with very complicated needs and our staff is amazing. They dive in and figure out how best to support the child. We make a difference in people's lives. Sometimes I get notes from parents or families telling me the difference that ACDS made to them. Sometimes I think I maybe even underestimate it because there is always so much going on but if you take a minute to think about it, it is really profound what we do.

---

## What are your favorite memories or some of your favorite stories?

I remember that first graduation in Scarsdale, taking a picture with Eloise who was so proud of herself. I recently celebrated 20 years of service and received a leaf from the tree of life, which sweet little Gemma presented to me. I will never forget that. I remember when the Greek Archbishop came to Hellenos and one of our residents, Despina, hugged him. She just threw her arms around him and he was thrilled! Things like that are really pretty special.

---

## What has changed in the years you have been leading ACDS?

There are changes in the scale of the agency that should not be underestimated. We had 155 employees, now we have 900. We have a budget of \$47 million and growing. The reach of the agency has expanded tremendously. We have had to professionalize our agency to align it with



ACDS believes that All Children Deserve Success and is committed to services that will follow children throughout their lives and into their adult years.



our size. We are not a mom and pop agency anymore. We bought the building in Plainview, which was important to solidify our presence. The scale, the geographic reach, the scope of our programs, and how we are known and being sought out throughout the region has changed. I am proud that we have been able to do all this without losing sight of our heritage.

Also, my job has changed as the agency has changed. It was necessary in the first couple of years that I was very hands on, to ensure the agency's survival. I was very involved in the growth opportunities in Westchester. We had to negotiate losing some of the agency leadership over the years, sometimes in devastating ways (like with the passing of Linda Sperber, and more recently with Elizabeth Gertler, who was our director of day habilitation services). My history prior to ACDS was in turning around failing agencies and then moving on to my next challenge. But once I came here, I never wanted to leave. There is always more to do.

One of my favorite stories is from an IAC conference. Judith Jamison, head of the Alvin Ailey Dance Studio, was a speaker. She said her role was being in charge of the "vision thing." You get a team in place and you don't need to be in charge of all the operations but you still need to provide the vision. That's what my role has been growing into. Everything from new housing opportunities through ISH grants, our new summer adventure respite camp, expanding into Pelham, seeing the future of OPW being fiscal intermediary services, which now serves 570 families and ramping up that program. We are a player now. When I am in Albany people know who we are. They know our agency, they know our history and the good work we do. That's important. I truly believe you have to continue to grow and you have to be open. It can go in different and unexpected directions and you can't be afraid to take a chance. You are not going to succeed with everything but you have to keep pushing ahead. I think that is what I really bring now, the vision.

## What are some of the biggest challenges you feel the agency faces?

The changing environment in adult services is really challenging. We don't know what the future of adult services is. OPWDD serves about 130,000 individuals, huge numbers. We don't know what the future model is going to be. We have gotten away from traditional group homes and we have to see what the state transitions to. I do think in both adult and children services we are at some sort of transitional point and we have to be ready for wherever it takes us.

On the school side, there are always changes with the school districts and it is not entirely clear what will come next. The New York model is very unique to our state. So how we respond is to be flexible. You have to stay current on trends at the federal level, state and local level, be aware of financial realities. You can't become complacent and you need to be ready to take the chances that come up. You can really only do that if you have the support of your board. You earn that over the years.

---

## What is your vision for the future of the agency?

I would like to be part of developing new housing options for adults, which the whole industry is beginning to explore. I think it is important to be looking at new and necessarily different housing options for our young adults. This is especially critical if the state is no longer doing brick and mortar housing development. This is where fundraising comes in and other things as well.

I have been tremendously frustrated by the lack of support for Early Intervention. To families, it may be the single most valuable service we offer but it has been starved over the last 25 years. I would like to be part of working with Jane and other people to see a period of rebirth for Early Intervention.



## AMAZING STAFF CREATE AWESOME MEMORIES SNOWBALL 2024



## Party Time! Adult Services Hosts Their Snow Ball Dance

Many wonderful memories were made at this year's Snow Ball Dance. Our participants were dressed to the nines and enjoyed dancing to their favorite songs late into the night. With the overwhelming support from our community we were able to incorporate a photo booth, which was a huge hit! The event would not be possible without our amazing staff whose enthusiasm and attention to detail make the evening a much anticipated annual highlight. A special thank you goes to our Event Sponsor, The Cardoza Family, who gave in memory of Ray Cardoza. Huge thanks to our Entertainment Sponsors: the Graney Family, the Musella Family, and the O'Donnell Family. Sweetest thanks to the Greenberg/Tujague family for the beautiful and yummy dessert bar that they donated.



 **ACDS**

ACDS believes that All Children Deserve Success and is committed to services that will follow children throughout their lives and into their adult years.







## ACDS Celebrates St. Patrick's Day

ACDS enjoyed our annual St. Patrick's Day Celebration on March 16. The festive affair featured dancers from the Hagen Kavanaugh School of Dance, live music from local band Good Clean Fun and delicious food and drink catered by Kasey's Kitchen & Cocktails.

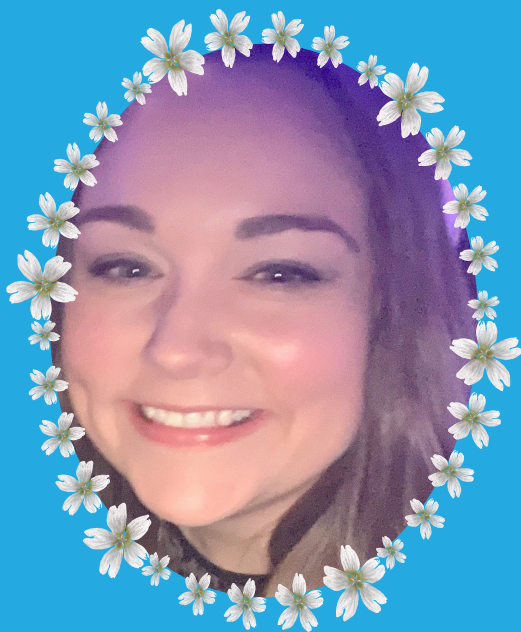
We were thrilled to honor the wonderful Peter Flyntz, President of FZC Consultants who patiently and expertly tends to all our IT needs.

ACDS is deeply grateful to all our incredible sponsors, especially our Event Sponsors Scahill Law Group and Alera Group; our Ireland Trip Sponsors Hugh O'Connell and James E. Fitzgerald, Inc.; our Group Home Sponsors: Mike Durney and family; Community Care Rx; eVero; Colonial Management and LP Finn; our Guinness Sponsor: cci Voice; our Jameson's Sponsors: Valley Bank and NRP Group; our Bailey's Sponsor: Joey Duffy and Family and our Raffle Basket Sponsors: Balloon Mission, JAFPC Architect; Graceann Faulkner, Kath O'Brien, Jane Shimkin, Liz Campbell, Tiana Jones and Tracy Kirley.



ACDS believes that All Children Deserve Success and is committed to services that will follow children throughout their lives and into their adult years.





## In Loving Memory

The ACDS community suffered a terrible loss with the unexpected and devastating passing of Elizabeth Razukiewicz-Gertler, our Director of Day Services. Saying Elizabeth was director of day services doesn't fully encompass the full breadth of her responsibilities. To many of us, Elizabeth's name is synonymous with Day Hab. She lived and breathed it. Her big board of activities was a marvel to behold. She hummed with pride and purpose in describing her program to people, be it colleagues, new families, community members or donors. Elizabeth took enormous pride in her job and brought an unending amount of humor, passion, creativity and attention to detail in making each day impactful for our constituents.

We continue to hold Elizabeth's husband Matt, her siblings, nieces and nephews, and in-laws in our thoughts and prayers. We likewise are wrapping our day hab staff, participants, and their families in love as they process this unfathomable news. Elizabeth's time on this earth was far too brief. We hope that it is a source of comfort to her family to know that by shining her light throughout the halls of Sacred Heart and St. Pius, Elizabeth made this agency, this community and this world a better place.

## Spend a Saturday with ACDS Pelham

ACDS Pelham is growing in exciting ways – including with the opening of a Saturday program to serve our students and graduates beyond the school week. The kiddos have been absolutely loving this arts and crafts focused eight week session and we anticipate opening a spring/summer session with a gardening focus! Thank you to Rich Scotti, Linda Stern, Trinity Ingram and Kenesha Watson for their leadership of this program!



ACDS believes that All Children Deserve Success and is committed to services that will follow children throughout their lives and into their adult years.







## ACDS Celebrates World Down Syndrome Day

We enjoyed a series of World Down Syndrome Day celebrations. At our early childhood center in Plainview families were treated to an extremely adorable parade. We were delighted to have two honorees receive our distinguished graduate award: Craig Ludin, who runs the mail room at BankUnited, and Connie Katsoulis, an incredible TA in Miss Pam's room. Connie graduated from ACDS in 1979 and Craig in 1981. We were so excited to recognize these wonderful individuals for the contributions they have made to their communities. We are deeply grateful to BankUnited for sponsoring the day, including socks for all of our kiddos, a fun craft and a delicious lunch for our hard-working staff.

On March 21 our Let's Groove Zumba group performed on the floor of the Nassau Coliseum prior to the Long Island Nets basketball game. Many of our group home residents attended the game as well. It was a fun way to celebrate World Down Syndrome Day. The Let's Groove Zumba performers also LOVE being a part of the annual Alexander's Angels World Down Syndrome Day celebration at the mall. This year it was held on March 23 at Roosevelt Field Mall and our Let's Groovers three Zumba sets were one of the highlights of the event. The group shows the broader community what can be achieved when you focus on someone's ability instead of their disability. Great job Vera and all of our performers!



July 22, 2024

ACDS Golf Outing at Hempstead Golf & Country Club

September 28, 2024

Family Fun Day