

DIRECTIONS IN INDEPENDENT LIVING

QUARTERLY MAGAZINE • WINTER ISSUE 2024



OLEAN CHAMBER'S
SANTA CLAUS LANE PARADE pg10

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Employee of the Quarter Marcie Thurst

In the heart of our mission at Directions lies a dedication to service, and no one embodies this spirit more than Marcie Thurst, one of our esteemed Nutrition Outreach and Education Program (NOEP) Coordinators. Her exceptional contributions have earned her the distinguished title of Employee of the Quarter, a recognition well deserved.

Marcie, a model worker of professionalism and positivity, navigates the complexities of assisting individuals with SNAP applications with unparalleled grace.

One of our program Managers, Caitlin Metler, who nominated Marcie, remarked on her resilience, "Marcie has faced several challenges both personally and professionally and has overcome these challenges with grace."

Her significant contributions to Directions are evident in her interactions. Marcie's professionalism shines as she addresses the needs of consumers and collaborates with external agencies.

Marcie also extends her expertise beyond her immediate role, having masterminded the first successful Golf Tournament for the "Together We Thrive" program, further showcasing her initiative and innovation.

Marcie's advocacy for Directions and its clients is unwavering. She tirelessly works with the Local Department of Social Services (LDSS) to secure rightful benefits for consumers, demonstrating her dedication to the agency's advocacy efforts.

Her effectiveness within the Directions team is also noteworthy; her involvement in the Marketing and Fundraising Committee helps to elevate our public profile, and her contributions to the Golf Committee over the past two years have been invaluable.



As a role model, Marcie stands out. Her positive outlook, strong advocacy, active participation in committees, and willingness to voice concerns when needed set a standard for all employees.

Her commitment and professionalism are consistently evident. "She is always advocating for her consumers; she maintains her composure in stressful situations and isn't afraid to speak up when she notices a concern," praises Caitlin.

Marcie's ability to step out of her comfort zone for the betterment of the program and the agency underscores her dedication to Directions' success.

Human Services is a demanding field, mentally and emotionally, yet Marcie's relentless optimism and grace under pressure exemplify the best of what Directions seeks in its dedicated workers.

Her contributions not only enhance the services we provide but also the lives of those we serve. Congratulations, Marcie, for being an inspiration to us all!



PROGRAM SPOTLIGHT: DWYER PEER TO PEER

A Christmas Blessing Serving The Most Deserving

In the heart of winter, when the world is wrapped in a chilly embrace, the warmth of human kindness burns brightest. This holiday season, the Olean Elks Lodge has shown their unwavering commitment to community service as they brought light to the lives of those most in need. In a heartfelt display of generosity and compassion, the Lodge meticulously gathered and provided the ingredients for a homemade Christmas dinner, complete with thoughtful gifts, for thirty veteran families. This noble act was a living testament to the true spirit of the season, a time for giving, caring, and sharing.

Lori Yardman, the Lodge's CIP Coordinator, expressed the deep roots of this generosity, "This act of kindness is underpinned by the unwavering support of the Elks National Foundation. Their grants, fueled by the generous contributions of our lodge members, enable us to broaden our horizons of care and touch the lives of many. Achieving our donation goals is more than a target; it represents a covenant of hope and support for those in dire need."

Along with Lori Yardman and Eron VanPatton, Exalted Lodge Ruler, the coordination and distribution of these festive meals and gifts were also championed by Larry McDonald and Liz Conner, the dedicated coordinators of the Dwyer Veterans program at Directions in Independent Living. Their tireless efforts ensured that each veteran family received not only the essentials for a memorable Christmas dinner but also felt the warmth of being valued and remembered.

As we ponder over this holiday season, let us embrace and propagate the ethos of the Olean Elks Lodge. Their actions remind us that through unity, compassion, and a commitment to service, we have the power to infuse light and warmth into the lives of those around us, particularly those who have selflessly served our country. Let's continue to be pillars of hope and support, demonstrating that even in the coldest of winters, the heart of our community beats strong with unwavering warmth and kindness.

A Journey Through Time Cultural Center Visit

In the lush landscapes of Cattaraugus, Allegany, and Chautauqua counties, the Directions in Independent Living's Transportation Program is a great service that helps to empower people with disabilities and those with OPWDD eligibility. This cornerstone service transcends beyond mere conveyance; it's a lifeline that connects individuals to the essential facets of life. From critical medical appointments to recreational pursuits, this program embodies the true spirit of independence, breaking barriers and fostering self-reliance.

The program's impact is vividly seen in its recent excursion to the Seneca-Iroquois National Museum (SINM) in Salamanca, NY. Here, a group of consumers were not just transported but were taken on an enlightening journey through the annals of Hodinöhsö:ni' history. The museum, a treasure trove of Hodinöhsö:ni' artifacts and historical documents, offered a unique window into the rich cultural heritage of the Onöndowa'ga:' (Seneca) and Hodinöhsö:ni' (Iroquois) peoples.

This trip was more than a visit; it was a testament to the program's commitment to accessibility and cultural enrichment. The transportation service ensured seamless travel, affirming its role in providing more than just mobility. The program's inclusion of travel vouchers for local taxis and ridesharing companies further highlights its adaptability and dedication to meeting diverse needs.

As the participants delved into the museum's extensive collection, they experienced a profound connection with their heritage, facilitated by the independence and opportunities afforded by the Directions in Independent Living's Transportation Program. This journey was not just a physical one; it was an exploration of identity, history, and community - a true embodiment of the program's mission to connect and empower.



A Warm Heart for the Community Karyn Fox

In the heart of the Southern Tier of New York, amidst the biting cold of brutal winters, Karyn Fox emerges as a volunteer that brings hope and warmth. For the second consecutive year, Karyn has meticulously crafted around 600 hats, each a unique blend of functionality and artistry. She donates these hats to various care organizations throughout the local area. Her generous donation of 50 of these hats to Directions in Independent Living has become a cornerstone of our annual warm drive, touching the lives of many in our local community.

Karyn's hats are more than just accessories; they are symbols of care and compassion. Made from high-grade wool, these hats are designed to provide maximum warmth and comfort to those who need it most. Through Directions in Independent Living, Karyn's hats have found their way into care packages, which also include gloves, scarves, socks, mittens, hand warmers, and emergency blankets. These packages have been a lifeline for hundreds of homeless individuals and others lacking proper winter clothing.

Each stitch Karyn sews is infused with her dedication and love, making each hat a personal gift of warmth. Her efforts resonate deeply in our community, bringing tangible relief to those bracing the harsh winters. Karyn Fox stands out as an angelic figure, her hands sewing not just wool but also bringing together a stronger, more caring community.

In this heartfelt spotlight, we celebrate Karyn Fox – a true embodiment of selflessness and community spirit. Her contributions transcend mere physical warmth; they ignite a warmth of spirit, fostering a sense of community and care that is invaluable. Thank you, Karyn, for being the warmth in our winter, the light in our dark days, and an inspiration to us all.



STRAWW's Christmas Celebration A Yuletide Gathering

The Southern Tier Advocacy Without Walls (STRAWW) embraced the festive season's spirit with a Christmas dinner that was as heartening as it was delicious. In a display of community and care, a full holiday spread was laid out for STRAWW's consumers, who were encouraged to bring guests to partake in the joyous occasion. The dinner, replete with all the trimmings of a traditional feast, provided more than sustenance; it offered a space for camaraderie and connection.

As families and friends broke bread together, the atmosphere buzzed with the sharing of stories and laughter, weaving a tapestry of shared experiences. The sense of unity was palpable, as new acquaintances were formed and old ones rekindled. To ensure the holiday cheer was extended beyond the event, participants were given to-go boxes to carry the festive flavors home.

STRAWW's commitment to recovery and independence shone through as their Recovery Guides mingled with guests, embodying the organization's dedication to tailored support and goal setting. These guides are the torchbearers of hope, helping individuals and families light their "Spark in Life" through personalized recovery plans and integration with community activities.

This celebratory meal underscored STRAWW's ethos of holistic support, illustrating that recovery thrives in an environment of mutual support. It was a reminder that while STRAWW provides essential tools for goal achievement and independence, it also fosters a family of encouragement where every member supports another, not just during the holidays, but every day.



Empowerment In Action AKT Karate Seminar

On January 3rd, 2024, the Transitions Program at Directions in Independent Living took a remarkable step in empowering its consumers by participating in a self-defense seminar at AKT Combatives Academy. This enlightening session was generously donated by Desmond, the dojo's owner, and Kendall, our own Dawn Tucker's daughter, reinforcing the academy's commitment to community service.

Participants from the Transitions Program, which serves youth and young adults aged 14-25 with developmental disabilities, had the unique opportunity to learn critical self-defense techniques. They engaged in traditional, reality-based training, focusing on achieving their best possible health while absorbing values of self-discipline, honor, and courage.

The AKT Academy, known for its holistic approach to martial arts, welcomed our consumers warmly. It was a day filled with enthusiastic learning, laughter, and the strengthening of both body and mind. By aligning with AKT's philosophy of nurturing visionary warriors who uphold integrity, justice, and strength, our Transitions Program consumers expanded their horizons beyond everyday skills.

The Transitions Program is dedicated to fostering independence in young adults through a variety of services, including college and career readiness, independent living skills, and employment preparedness. This self-defense class was a testament to our belief in comprehensive personal development—going beyond the classroom to equip our young adults with the confidence and skills needed for all walks of life.

Our gratitude goes to AKT Combatives Academy for this partnership, which was not only a lesson in self-protection but also an inspiring demonstration of the community coming together to uplift each other. We cherish these moments that contribute to our mission of facilitating self-sufficiency and advocating for a vibrant social life for our consumers.



Olean Chamber's Holiday Santa Claus Lane Parade

As the snow gently settles on the streets of Olean, the spirit of the holiday season shines brighter with the community's anticipation of the annual Santa Claus Lane Parade. This year's event, held on November 24, was not just a testament to the season's joy but also to the unwavering commitment of the Olean Chamber of Commerce and community volunteers.

The Chamber, the backbone of this festive tradition, presented an evening that resonated with fun and laughter, echoing through the hearts of attendees. Their efforts ensure that the parade is more than just a spectacle; it's a celebration of togetherness and community spirit.

This year, the Chamber took a commendable step towards inclusivity by coordinating with Directions in Independent Living to reserve a dedicated viewing area for the disabled. The caring hands of volunteers like Krissy Wagner and Tammy VanEtten ensured that those with disabilities could comfortably enjoy the parade, embracing the festive cheer just like everyone else. This gesture was not only thoughtful but deeply appreciated by all who benefited from this act of kindness.

The Santa Claus Lane Parade is always a highlight of the holiday season, attracting people of all ages to downtown Olean. The Chamber's encouragement for local organizations, businesses, and individuals to partake with floats, musical units, and historical displays is a beautiful example of community collaboration.

A special call to action was made by Meme from the Chamber, seeking four volunteers to assist in this noble endeavor. Those who stepped up were treated to camaraderie over pizza before undertaking their roles, ensuring that every corner of the allocated area was well-managed for the special attendees.

We extend our deepest gratitude to the Olean Chamber of Commerce for their tireless work in fostering a business-friendly environment, supporting local non-profits, and above all, for nurturing the sense of community that makes Olean truly special. Their dedication to creating inclusive events where everyone can participate and enjoy is nothing short of inspiring.

For those wishing to be a part of future events or parades, you're encouraged to reach out. You can find application forms online or by contacting the Chamber office directly. Let us continue to support these initiatives and build upon the foundation of inclusivity and joy that the Chamber has set for our beloved town. A heartfelt thank you to all who make these moments memorable.



Since 1906, the Greater Olean Area Chamber of Commerce has been the leading business organization in the greater Olean area. We are the Southern Tier's largest business organization. Our work includes lobbying local and state leaders, developing programs, enhancing workforce development, and working to support the small business owners, large corporate entities, non-profit organizations, manufacturers, and residents who call our area home.



A Day of Holiday Fun

Winter Staff Advance

For our Winter Staff Advance we enjoyed a festive day at the Christ United Methodist Church here in Olean

On December 21st, 2023, Directions in Independent Living took a significant step towards fostering team cohesion and professional growth with their Holiday Staff Advance at the Christ United Methodist Church in Olean, NY. The Directions crew gathered from 9 am to 1 pm for a memorable holiday party. With a focus on team-building and friendly competition, the event featured a variety of engaging activities designed to foster camaraderie among attendees.

Participants enjoyed a lively game of Pictionary, showcasing their drawing skills and quick thinking, while Jingle Mingle and the "Name 3 Things" challenge provided ample opportunities for laughter and interaction. A unique icebreaker activity had guests mingling, as they sought to complete a checklist by finding out interesting facts about each other - such as identifying the left-handed individuals or those who aren't fans of Christmas movies, adding an element of fun detective work to the mix.

The event was further highlighted by the presentation of awards, adding a touch of recognition and celebration. Cortney Lathrop dazzled everyone, winning the Most Festive Costume Award with an outfit that perfectly captured the holiday spirit. Meanwhile, Marcie Thurst was honored with the Employee of the Quarter Award, recognized by her peers for her outstanding contributions and dedication, which stood out significantly during this festive season. Additionally, the superlatives voted by the staff brought smiles and nods of agreement across the room: Biggest Class Clown: Larry, Most Likely to Forget Their Keys: Krissy, Most Likely to Volunteer: DJ, Most Organized: Caitlin, Most Likely to be Late: Liz, Most Likely to Order Take Out for Lunch: Cortney, Most Likely to Talk When Muted: Nancy, Most Likely to Forget What You Just Told Them: Keith, Most Likely to Put a Smile on Your Face: Howard, Most Willing to Help: Dawn. These moments of recognition, alongside the interactive games and team-building activities, not only celebrated individual achievements and quirks but also strengthened the sense of community and appreciation among the team.





Featured Consumer for December

Cheyenne Estabrook

Directions in Independent Living proudly celebrates Cheyenne "Shy" Estabrook as December's Consumer of the Month. Living in the peaceful town of Fillmore, NY, with her loving parents, Cheyenne's life is a testament to family love and the pursuit of personal aspirations.

A dreamer at heart, Cheyenne once aspired to be a guardian of animals, a passion that has beautifully morphed into her favorite hobby—caring for her beloved pets, including Kristoff the cat, six chickens with the most unique names, and three fish that bring tranquility to her home.

Cheyenne's heart beats for the sandy shores of Holden Beach, NC, her cherished travel destination. However, it's the Buffalo Bills that ignite her sports enthusiasm closer to home. Among her life goals, Cheyenne is determined to embrace health, secure employment, and forge a path toward independent living, all while nurturing dreams of family life and adventure.

Her advocacy for animal rights mirrors her compassionate spirit, which shines brightly through her volunteer work at a Houghton nursing home. Colleagues fondly dub her the "animal whisperer," a title that speaks to her innate connection with animals.

Influential figures in her life, like her parents and sister Holly, have been instrumental in her journey towards independence—a journey further supported by Directions in Independent Living's Transportation Program. With their help, Cheyenne has expanded her community connections and independence, fostering new friendships along the way.

Cheyenne's one wish, selflessly, is to provide financial support for her mother—a reflection of her generous soul. In ten years, she envisions a life enriched by working with animals and living autonomously, a future that Directions is committed to supporting through our services, offering the freedom and flexibility vital to individuals with disabilities in our community. Cheyenne's story is one of unwavering determination and boundless affection, truly embodying the spirit of Directions in Independent Living.



Featured Consumer for January

Camellia Bertron

A Heart Full of Dreams and Compassion...

Camellia Bertron, affectionately known as Cam, is celebrated as the Directions in Independent Living's Consumer of the Month for January 2024. Residing in Olean with her beloved Chihuahuas, Mickey Mouse and Mini Mouse, Cam embodies resilience and compassion. Growing up in a large family as the second of seven siblings, Cam faced profound loss early in life with the passing of her mother and two brothers. These experiences shaped her compassionate nature and her aspiration to become a mother, a role she fulfills through the care of her "children," her dogs.

Cam's hobbies include spending quality time with her pets and dreaming of a visit to Hawaii, a place she has longed to explore. While not a sports enthusiast, she holds a special place in her heart for the Buffalo Bills, honoring her late brother's memory. Her life goals are simple yet profound: to own her home and to continue her lifelong passions for animal welfare and helping others.

Volunteering at Harvest Field Ministries, Cam has taken a break but is eager to return and contribute once again. She credits her mother as her most influential figure, instilling in her the values of helping others and pursuing her dreams. Despite facing challenges, including the interruption of her college education due to her mother's passing, Cam's spirit remains undeterred.

Working with Directions in Independent Living (DIL) has been a significant part of Cam's journey, offering her unwavering support with Social Security/SSI and treating her with unparalleled respect and kindness. Cam appreciates the non-judgmental approach and the personal respect she receives from her Directions specialists, DJ Moore, which has greatly impacted her life.

While uncertain about the future, Cam's story is one of enduring hope, love, and the relentless pursuit of happiness. Her life reflects a deep commitment to her family, her pets, and her community, making her a true inspiration to us all.



Featured Program for February

Mental Health Advocacy

Empowering Independence: The Role of a Mental Health Peer Advocate

In the heart of Cattaraugus County, Directions in Independent Living's Mental Health Peer Advocate Program stands out as an opportunity for hope and empowerment for adults with disabilities transitioning from institutionalized care to independent living in the community of their choice.

This pivotal program offers personalized support to those discharged from hospitals, assisted living facilities, or jails. A unique aspect of the service is the one-on-one engagement with a Peer Advocate—a person who not only resides within the community but also possesses extensive knowledge of local services and agencies. This alliance ensures that individuals receive a tailored approach to finding housing, setting up essential appointments, and connecting with crucial services such as food pantries and social service departments.

What sets the Peer Advocate apart is their lived experience and established network within the community, enabling them to provide relevant and relatable support. They play a multifaceted role, from accompanying individuals to food pantries to assisting in obtaining government-supported necessities like phones. The goal is to ensure a seamless integration into community life, with ongoing monthly check-ins to maintain a smooth transition.

Beyond direct support, the Peer Advocate at Directions in Independent Living also plays a strategic role by participating in committees and conducting outreach. This helps them stay informed about other beneficial programs and services, thereby enhancing the quality of assistance provided to the individuals they serve.

Regular visits to local hospitals and jails are part of the outreach efforts, ensuring that those nearing discharge are aware of the available support. Our advocates also engage in Regional Advisory Committee meetings and conferences, continually broadening their understanding of resources to best serve our clients.

The Mental Health Peer Advocate Program is more than just a list of services; it's about building confidence, fostering independence, and nurturing a sense of belonging in the community. It exemplifies Directions in Independent Living's commitment to enhancing the quality of life for adults with disabilities, ensuring that each individual's transition to independent living is not only possible but also positive and empowering.

We would like to extend a huge
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Harvest Field Ministries

Christmas Meal

On the brisk afternoon of December 16th, 2023, the air at Harvest Field Ministries was filled not just with the scent of a Christmas meal but also the spirit of giving, thanks to our NY Connects program here at Directions in Independent Living. In an outreach event for Olean, the team organized "Operation Winter Warmth," a drive that collected coats, sweaters, socks, and mittens to distribute to those in need during the season of giving.

The initiative, led by the compassionate efforts of individuals like Tammy Van Etten, Sara Ramsdell, and DJ Moore, stocking shelves at the food pantry, ensuring that the community received not only great holiday food but also the extra warmth of the season. Sara added to the generosity by greeting community members and discussing potential services available to them, embodying the true purpose of NY Connects as a gateway to resources and support.

The community's heart was further warmed by volunteers Pastor Doug, John VanEtten and Raelynn Withey, who generously purchased and donated sweatshirts and sweatpants, wrapping the less fortunate in tangible tokens of care and attention.

NY Connects stands as a vital point of entry for long-term services and supports for people of all ages and needs in both Cattaraugus and Allegany counties. This program is a testament to the community's dedication to ensuring everyone can stay healthy and independent. During "Operation Winter Warmth," NY Connects didn't just offer material support; it provided the community with a message of hope and togetherness, essential ingredients for a joyous and warm holiday season.



About our Agency

Directions in Independent Living is a non profit organization with locations in Olean and Wellsville New York. Directions helps people with disabilities live more independent lives. We have over 17 individual programs that specialize in many different areas or needs that these individuals may struggle with in their daily lives. The Directions organization has been described by its consumers as "understanding, supportive, accommodating, and family oriented."

Every year, more than 1 in 5 New Yorkers has symptoms of a mental disorder, are stricken with poverty, or on the verge of homelessness. Moreover, in any year, 1 in 10 adults and children experience mental health challenges serious enough to affect functioning in work, family and school life. Also, nearly a quarter of veterans (22 percent) in New York state, were found to have a probable diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder and/or major depression. Compared to similar individuals in the general population, the veterans studied were at an eight-fold greater risk of probable PTSD and a two- to four-fold greater risk of major depression.

While many services are available to those in need, more than 40 percent of those in need of services or help report being unaware of what help is available or uncertain about how to navigate the systems that provide assistance. Outreach to connect these individuals with services and better coordination among government and community agencies is needed. We need a more combined effort put into connecting consumers with care coordinators who can provide personalized assistance across a range of service sectors. The existing system often misses those people most in need of outreach or those who have not yet connected with any assistance organizations.

That is why Directions in Independent Living was founded over 30 years ago. It is only through the generosity of people like you, that we are able to continue to serve, assist, and help our friends, neighbors, and veterans that are in need.

If you would, please consider making a donation, referring someone that might be in need of our services, or even volunteer yourself as a helper for one of our programs.

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