



**Robert Stack**

CEO of Community Options

By Michelle Walbaum

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After the bus dropped him off, Bernard Krawkosky walked down the street and tried to place his key in an apartment that was not his own.

Hearing the rattle of the key, retired homemaker Edith Chedick opened the door. Krawkosky, who is blind and mentally handicapped, couldn't understand why this was not his apartment. So Chedick led him down to the bus stop and showed him how the bus had dropped him off at the wrong stop. She then helped him find his way back to the right apartment.

"They have lunch once a month now," said Robert Stack, CEO of Community Options, a nonprofit company based in Princeton that helps developmentally disabled people find housing and jobs in communities around the nation. Krawkosky's experience illustrates how living among the general population helps mentally handicapped people form friendships and connections—one of the most important aspects of the human experience, he said.

"There's a direct relationship between the severity of your disability and your level of loneliness," he said. "We try to develop friendships among people with developmental disabilities and the general community, and as you know, there's a direct relationship between longevity of life and the number of friends you have."

The company manages 70 homes for the developmentally disabled in New Jersey. Each unit houses two to four people, he said. Many of the residents are also given jobs, which range from fast food careers to working in the florist shop Vaseful in downtown Princeton—a small business that, along with others in different regions of the state and country, are owned by Community Options.

"We believe people that can work, should and will work," Stack said. "Community Options has a variety of entrepreneurial businesses where people with disabilities can work." Adults are not the only focus however, he said. Reaching teens with developmental disabilities is especially important, as many of them are unsure of what to do after they matriculate high school.

"Community Options has developed an employment program, where we provide unpaid internships with places like Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital and other facilities like that. We have students go there and try our different jobs as interns. We coach them on the job and it's our long term goal that after they graduate, they'll be hired by that facility," he explained.

Community Options started out of Stack's home in Bordertown 21 years ago, and has grown to be the fifth largest nonprofit in the state, supporting 1,500 people, he added. Stack has been around the disabled since he was 13, when he was studying for priesthood at a seminary. Volunteer work was part of the program.

"I worked at a home for children with disabilities and it stuck with me," he said. "So after college and graduate school I decided to make it my life mission."

He started the company with the aim of empowering people with developmental disabilities—helping them live their own independent lives. Many in New Jersey end up in institutions, where many aspects of their lives are controlled, he explained. They are told what time they have to go to bed, what time they eat meals, what time they have to shower.

In contrast, the community living style of CO participants is much less rigid. They can cook their own food, for instance.

"The simple act of being able to cook is wonderful," he said. In addition, participants have access to all the small things communities have to offer: a trip to the movies, a walk in the park, swimming pools.

And instead of living with hundreds of other people, as in an institution, CO participants receive a smaller, more manageable living situation. "People thrive in smaller environments," he said.

However, the group homes that Community Options offers are not available to many of the developmentally disabled.

"New Jersey is one of the most antiquated, backward states as far as supporting people with developmental disabilities," he said. "We have the second largest number of people with developmental disabilities in institutions. The first largest is Texas, but Texas has over 26 million people. We have 8.5 million people." He wishes the state would make this issue a priority. But while he waits, he knows that the company he started is making a small difference at least.

"I love the fact that day by day, inch by inch, we are changing and improving the lives of others. That's what I live for. I realize that there are thousands of people on waiting lists, and if I can get one more person out of the institution, then something positive has happened," he said.

Community Options is located at 16 Farber Road in Princeton. Visit them on the web at <http://www.comop.org>.

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