



Jack Mudge

Jack Mudge has worked with people who have disabilities for much of his life. He speaks fondly of his time helping children with disabilities on soccer teams and in swim programs. But after about 20 years working for other non-profit agencies, the West Windsor native was thrilled to come back to Mercer County and serve as Chief Executive Officer of Advancing Opportunities.

Ewing-based Advancing Opportunities had been known as Cerebral Palsy of New Jersey up until last year. But the organization has broadened its mission to serve people with many disabilities in the state, thus necessitating the name change. It advocates for people with all types of disabilities in the areas of schooling, employment and housing.

For Jack Mudge, that commitment to serve so many different people represents a huge step forward from the time he joined the agency just five years ago. Now he sees himself as a connector; a person who, with the help of an outstanding staff, has helped Advancing Opportunities solidify connections with communities, government agencies and fund providers to change how people with disabilities are served throughout state.

For instance, the agency has developed an Assistive Technology Services program to help schools create classrooms that are accessible for students with disabilities, and to help businesses hire and retain people who need job accommodations. The agency also works to make it possible for children with disabilities to participate in community-based recreation programs.

But the agency's focus of late has turned to a more basic issue...

"We are committed to finding housing for people with disabilities as alternatives to living in institutions," Mudge said.

To advance that goal he has become a staunch supporter of bipartisan legislation introduced in the State Assembly known as bill A-1673. The bill seeks to rebalance resources for individuals with disabilities and help them move out of institutions and into communities of their choosing.

And Mudge, though fairly even-keeled in nature, is nearly incensed by a report that ranks New Jersey 49th out of 50 states in the way it handles its disabled community. Mississippi ranks last. He became involved in supporting this legislation through his work on the Legislative and Policy Committee of the New Jersey Association of Community Providers.

"It costs about \$730 a day for a disabled person to stay in an institution vs. \$300 a day to have them live in communities," Mudge said. "The state is suffering financial woes and the waiting list (of people waiting to get into institutions) is growing. Those institutions are aging and need serious repair. People with disabilities have a right to live where they want to live and we can provide the services and supports they'll need when they leave developmental centers."

Mudge works beyond Advancing Opportunities to ensure the disabled have greater employment opportunities. He chairs the Disability Committee for the Mercer County Workforce Investment Board (WIB). Mudge's committee advocates for the disabled, making sure that employment accessibility issues are monitored closely.

He also advocates on the state level. Mudge is on the Consumer Advisory Council of The UMDNJ Elizabeth M. Boggs Center for Developmental Disabilities. Council members help the Center identify trends and challenges faced by individuals, families, delivery systems and the disabled of New Jersey.

On the local level, Mudge has found ways expand his organization's community reach as a Board member of the Mercer Regional Chamber of Commerce (MRCC) and as a member of the Executive Committee for MRCC's Trenton Chapter.

Mudge enjoys his membership in MRCC's Non Profit Executive Council. He says its members don't just ask "what's in it for me?" Instead, he says the group is more about what everyone can learn from each other and develop together.

Additionally, Mudge finds time to serve on the Finance Committee of the Trenton YMCA. He enjoys being part of the organization's goal of building strong programs and being recognized as a pillar of community support.

His days of advocating for the disabled can be long but when they're over, Mudge still finds time for his great love of soccer. He helps coach an under-12 girls travel team, referring to his time with the team as his "sanity... and sometimes insanity." Mudge, who continues to play the game (when his body cooperates), enjoys seeing the girls master skills.

But, most importantly, he enjoys watching team members having fun and working together. Kind of like the way he approaches what he does every day. ■