

**Hub Highlights**

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Welcome to the first edition of *The Arclight* online.

After decades in print, we have moved to the digital age—a positive change and a sign of the times—as are the stories at your fingertips. People of all abilities are involved in every aspect of community life. We are active, mobile, interested and interesting. Not long ago, we would have asked that you turn the pages of a print publication to learn what we have been doing and the direction in which we are headed. Today, we encourage you scroll, click and read.

—Carmine Marchionda

## Hub Highlights

Small groups of individuals with similar interests begin and end each weekday at one of The Arc Rockland's community hubs situated in Congers, Orangeburg, Pearl River, Nyack and Suffern.

"The hubs serve as headquarters from which the groups branch out to engage in a range of activities and experiences throughout the County and surrounding communities," explains Director of Day Habilitation Jodi Taylor-Getz. This might include time spent volunteering at one of more than 100 not-for-profit organizations in Rockland and surrounding areas, visiting sites of educational or recreational interest, pursuing fitness classes at area gyms and Ys, working, taking music lessons or art classes or spending time on the river with the **Rockland Rowing Club** ([www.RocklandRowing.org](http://www.RocklandRowing.org)).



The opportunity for people to, quite literally, test the waters helps to foster inclusion. Since her introduction to the Rowing Club, Kieran Dunn has become an enthusiastic proponent of the sport. "My favorite part about rowing is working as a team," she says. "I like the feeling of going across the water together, appreciating nature. I never thought I'd be doing this. It's fun."

"The exposure to new experiences has had a positive impact on the people we support," says Ms. Taylor-Getz. "Because we have a presence within so many towns and villages, people have really gotten to know us. Being part of the broader community has given the people we support the confidence to try something new."

A case in point was a recent lunch at the **Fancy Buffet in Haverstraw** ([www.fancybuffet.com](http://www.fancybuffet.com)). During one group's weekly planning meeting, someone suggested lunch at this Haverstraw restaurant. "Some of the other people were hesitant at first, says Ms. Taylor-Getz. "But they all agreed to give the restaurant a try, and they loved it. The fact that many ideas for destinations come from the individuals is a clear sign of the success of our community hubs."

**Vision Sports Club in Pearl River**, ([www.vision-sportsclub.com](http://www.vision-sportsclub.com)) is home base for several of The Arc groups. A number of the participants at this hub have been friends since their high school days. In addition to other activities in Rockland, these men and women particularly enjoy fitness and nutrition classes run by Vision staff members. Members of the group take classes and regularly use the treadmills, bikes, weights and other exercise equipment at Vision.

The emphasis on community interaction throughout the day is a worthy goal, but it is not without challenges. Although most of the groups eat in restaurants on occasion, for the most part, "We bring lunches," says Team Leader Dorann Latarski. It is easier in the summer months, when parks and picnic grounds are open to the public. Finding a suitable indoor luncheon site where we can bring our lunches is more difficult in late autumn and winter. "The Blue Hill Office building has a beautiful cafeteria," notes Ms. Latarski. "Sometimes we eat lunch there. Following a stint of fitness walking at the RCC fieldhouse, we might eat lunch along with college students in the RCC café."

"One of the things we really do well is to put the ownership of what they will be doing during the week on the participants," comments Ms. Latarski. "Each group researches upcoming events and activities, and then, they work together to decide what they want to do and where they want to go. With the support of the staff, they build their own schedules and make their own choices. It's really neat, when one group finds something interesting to do and word spreads to another group."

Among the more unique destinations is the **Mitsuwa Marketplace, in Edgewater, New Jersey** ([www.Mitsuwa.com](http://www.Mitsuwa.com)). "This is a Japanese marketplace with a book shop, a gift shop, a grocery store and food court. It's right on the water with a view of the city," explains Ms. Latarski. "A staff member from The Arc found the place and introduced it to a group. Now other groups love going there. One individual tries a new food each time he goes back."

Volunteers at the ReStore operated by the **Bergen County Habitat for Humanity** ([www.BergenRestore.org](http://www.BergenRestore.org)) help to ticket and shelve items.

Through a recommendation from **The Office for the Aging, (Rocklandgov.com/departments/aging)**, a Rockland couple contacted The Arc to arrange for volunteer grocery shoppers from The Arc. The shoppers and the couple have built a warm and lasting relationship with benefits to all.

While interaction and inclusion have opened doors for people with intellectual and

developmental disabilities, the opportunities have necessitated a focus on practical matters, including money management and budgeting. "These skills are important when people want to purchase food or products," explains Ms. Latarski. "The application of practical skills occurs throughout the day."

Matthew Von Dollen and his ever-present companion Delilah, a Golden Retriever service dog, like the diversity of activities. "I like the people and my friends," says Mr. Von Dollen.

A more formal focus on education takes place at various sites which comprise the Successful Learning Center. "Every semester,



people take classes, many of which are located on college campuses. "One group is studying song writing, another is learning the history of super heroes. Says Ms. Latarski, "I think because there are more people with developmental disabilities out there, the general public has become more accepting."

Kathleen Mavrogiannis is Director of The Arc Rockland Day Habilitation Services in Pearl River, where she oversees two hubs. "I think acceptance among members of the community is especially the case because we are located right in the heart of town," she says. "The people we support have access to multiple food establishments, the library, Vision Sports Club—they have built relationships with proprietors." She remarks that the owner of a new coffee shop moved the furniture specifically to accommodate one of The Arc patrons who uses a wheelchair. With the advent of community hubs, Ms. Mavrogiannis says she has seen improvement in hub members' social skills. "Regular interaction with shopkeepers and other patrons has resulted in greater inclusion and acceptance."

Juliet Asamoah is Director of The Arc Senior Services. She believes the Senior hub in Suffern is an ideal location because it allows the participants to walk to local shops, restaurants and other spots of interest. "We have noticed that the seniors have developed relationships with the store owners who now know members of the group by name. The seniors love being out and about, participating in group discussions at the library, attending the Ramapo Senior Center. Location is key to the success of The Arc's hubs."

Of particular importance to the senior citizens is their right to choose what they want to do. "Two outings are typically offered each day, one in the morning and one after lunch. "Some people may not want to participate in projects to give back to the community," says Ms. Asamoah. Such projects include the creation of Valentines for veterans, Easter baskets for students at Prime Time for Kids and crafts for a holiday boutique, the proceeds of which are donated to **Soup Angels of The First Reformed Church of Nyack** ([www.nyackreformed.org/soup-angels](http://www.nyackreformed.org/soup-angels)). A number of the seniors particularly enjoy working in the **Garden of Hope at Good Samaritan Hospital** in Suffern, NY ([www.goodsamhosp.org/garden-of-hope](http://www.goodsamhosp.org/garden-of-hope)).

both sessions and choose to spend the time at the hub working on projects to give back to the community," says Ms. Asamoah. Such projects include the creation of Valentines for veterans, Easter baskets for students at Prime Time for Kids and crafts for a holiday boutique, the proceeds of which are donated to **Soup Angels of The First Reformed Church of Nyack** ([www.nyackreformed.org/soup-angels](http://www.nyackreformed.org/soup-angels)). A number of the seniors particularly enjoy working in the **Garden of Hope at Good Samaritan Hospital** in Suffern, NY ([www.goodsamhosp.org/garden-of-hope](http://www.goodsamhosp.org/garden-of-hope)).

Also popular is the time spent volunteering at The Arc Rockland's Prime Time For Kids Early Learning Center where, among other responsibilities, seniors read to the children and help out at lunchtime. "It is wonderful to observe the intergenerational relationships that have developed through this program," notes Ms. Asamoah. "The men and women enrolled in the Suffern Seniors hub are active people. They are enjoying life and are proud to be part of the Suffern community."



## The Shoppers

By Penny Wissner  
The group of five and Samantha Rochester (Community Specialist III with The Arc Rockland) came upstairs to my kitchen. Some of the people sat at my table, and others just stood around casually. I asked each one their name, (hoping I'd remember them!). Next time, I remembered some, but not everyone.

They are a small diverse group, mostly female, although young men have come at different times over the course of the year, but they seem to be a bit uncomfortable if they are the only one!

Some of the group are more outgoing, and some are a bit shy, not saying very much to me or saying nothing at all, just looking around at the kitchen.

Since I had broken a bone in my foot after a fall, I was not allowed to put any weight on it at all—an

extremely difficult thing to do in a nine room house with eleven steps! In addition, my husband doesn't drive anymore. So we are very grateful for the help these young people can give us. We are both in our eighties.

Since my husband has emphysema, he becomes short of breath when walking up the stairs to our kitchen. We have a bi-level house with stairs coming up from the garage to our front door and then to our kitchen.

There are supermarkets that deliver groceries in the county. The delivery people leave the groceries at the door, but they do not bring them into the kitchen. The people from The Arc bring the packages right to the counters, which is what we old folks need.

We are so indebted to them, for their youthful strength, their capabilities, their dependability, etc. I was delighted to have been referred to them by a social worker at the **Office For the Aging**, who suggested them in the first place.

After a few visits here, I found out that one of the helpers was an artist, and I told the group that I was an artist too...or had been. I then led them into the living/dining room where all of the walls are covered with art, including my paintings and photographs.

When I showed the room to them, they seemed to like the display. In fact, the reason I suggested that room in the first place was that they were noticing the art in the entryway and even in the kitchen. Not only does my own work hang, but art from our long-ago travels to other countries also is on display here.

I then asked one of the women if she would mind showing me some of her artwork. She did bring her sketch books next time, and they were wonderful, and I told her so! I was an art teacher many years ago.

Even though three of the five people remained the same, I still had trouble remembering names. Since I was decluttering, I offered to give them some of my excess art supplies I wasn't using any more. Next time, I gave out a few assorted sketch pads, pens, colored pencils and markers, crayons and some miscellaneous items.

When it came to Halloween and Christmas, I purchased small, simple gifts of candies and chocolates for them to share, just to show how much I appreciated their efforts.

All in all, I wanted them to feel comfortable dealing with me and coming into my house. I'm really glad to hear from Doran Latarski, (The Arc Team Leader) that they enjoy coming. They are a real treasure as they have a very professional role model in Samantha. She watches over them very carefully, teaching them how to open my front door, only after ringing the bell first to let me know someone is there. She thanks me when given something. I also give to the others, and she always makes sure the group says thank you to me. She is terrific.

I could have resumed shopping when my foot healed a number of months ago, but I am spoiled now! I also feel that it is a joint experience. They get to carry out clear instructions—a shopping list—learn about how much things cost, experience different lifestyles in the area, learn how to identify different market products, different colors on labels, different sizes of containers, to read labels carefully, how food is grouped in the store, etc. All this possibly in preparation for a future job, if that is what they want or can qualify for.

Since my husband and I are getting older, and the stairs are becoming difficult when carrying heavy items, this arrangement has benefited both of us, the shoppers and us!

Nice job, guys!



## A Mother's Perspective

"He is the happiest person I know," says Kathy Von Dollen of her son Matthew. "He has lived with seizures since the day he was born, but he doesn't let the seizures stop him."

A participant in The Arc's Nyack hub, Mr. Von Dollen, 26, is accompanied each day by his Golden Retriever service dog Delilah. For the seven years prior to Delilah's coming on the scene, Mr. Dollen's constant companion was Merlin, a Golden Retriever, who recently died of cancer.

The Von Dollens obtained both dogs through **Canine Assistants**, headquartered in Atlanta, Georgia ([www.canineassistants.org/contact-information](http://www.canineassistants.org/contact-information)). "The dogs are trained to help alert people prior to seizures." But Matthew was having so many seizures it wasn't always possible for Merlin to issue a warning," explains Ms. Von Dollen. "When Matthew was having a hard time, Merlin would get upset. He would sympathize with Matthew and would sometimes be so sad that he would become physically sick."

Merlin, and now Delilah, are beloved members of the Nyack hub. "When Merlin died, the people there were devastated," says Ms. Von Dollen. "That speaks volumes about how they feel about Matthew. They wanted the new dog there as soon as she came to live with us. Every

one of the staff members at the Nyack hub treat all of the participants with such dignity and kindness. It is beautiful. I like that the group has a home base in Nyack, and that they do different things in the community every day.

Kathy Von Dollen and husband Danny, a retired police officer, have confidence in the capabilities of The Arc staff. "When Matthew has a seizure, they know what to do, and they know when they need to call me. It's a wonderful, wonderful relationship. I am at ease when Matthew is with the people from The Arc. They are phenomenal. They are family, and I adore them."

The Von Dollens of Blauvelt, NY, are parents of four, including Matthew's siblings: Kristen, a nurse at Westchester Medical Center; Erin, a student at Manhattan College majoring in Special Education and Joseph who will attend college in the fall.

"We have been very, very lucky. We have a terrific family," says Ms. Von Dollen, "and we have met some wonderful people who have helped us along the way."

## Successful Learning Center

*The History of Superheroes* and *Money Matters* are two of the dozens of courses offered on college campuses through the Successful Learning Center (SLC).

Melinda Placanica, Director of Administrative Affairs and Sheri Cappello, Director of Academic Affairs launched the organization a decade ago with four students. Today more than 200 alternate learners enroll in several classes each semester.

"Our program is similar to a continuing education program," explains Ms. Placanica. "We hire industry professionals and people in academia—people going into the field of special education, musicians, artists, photographers, writers—people with very vibrant personalities and a passion for what they do."

The Successful Learning Center is hosted by Dominican College, Blauvelt; Mount Saint Mary College, Newburgh; Pace University, Pleasantville; Fordham University, Westchester; Westchester Community College and sites at two community centers in Rockland.

"One might think *The History of Superheroes* would be strictly for fun," says Ms. Placanica. And there is no question that the students enjoy the class. But there is a significant amount of work involved. "We have the students rewrite the life of specific superheroes. We ask them to tell us what would happen if the superhero lost his or her power. We ask them to change the ending of a superhero story with which they are familiar. The point of such an exercise is to teach critical thinking—to stretch what they know."

*Play Across Cultures*, another course with an intriguing title, offers lessons on cultural diversity. "Students learn about the ways in which the economy, social mores, the environment and climate influence what games people play across the globe," explains Ms. Placanica.

Ideas for courses begin with a pitch meeting. "The fall and spring semesters are approximately 15 weeks long," says Ms. Placanica. "The summer semester is eight weeks long." Instructors suggesting new courses provide an outline for each week of the semester with an explanation of the "overall point of the course, vocabulary that will be taught and new ideas to which the students will be exposed," explains Ms. Placanica. "We focus on what the students need to learn and how what they have learned can be applied toward further integration into the wider community and in their daily lives."

SLC students range in age from 18 to 90. They hail from Rockland, Westchester and Orange Counties and have a range of abilities. "Some of our students hold Bachelor's degrees; some are taking course at the SLC through their high schools," notes Ms. Placanica. Enrollees from The Arc Rockland and other agencies attend in groups and are accompanied by members of The Arc staff. "We always let the agencies know what we expect of their staff. We need them to support the students by example. On the first day of class we explain that we will call on staff members as readily as the students, and we will ask their opinions on the topic being studied."

Some SLC students enroll independently. In such cases, SLC typically pairs the

individual with peer mentors who are paid by Successful Learning Center. The mentors serve as "cheerleaders for the students," says Ms. Placanica. "They help with reading, writing, socializing."

They also help the SLC students use the college library, cafeteria or student center. At the conclusion of the SLC semester, students receive Certificates of Completion during awards ceremonies at each SLC site.

Says Tara Lynch of her SLC experience, "College classes are awesome, I like my college teachers. They make me laugh, and I like to see the college students."

Beginning in 2018, a unique program at Pace University added a new dimension to the SLC experience. Approximately 12 SLC students participated in a spring semester course offered through the Dyson Scholars in Residence Program on the University's Pleasantville campus. Dr. Jane Collins, Associate Professor in the department of English heads this initiative.

Pace students enrolled in the year-long Dyson Scholars Program live together in a residence hall, attend seminars together and develop a community service project for the spring semester.

"Our service is a creative writing workshop for SLC students," explains Dr. Collins. The University students mentor the SLC students as they work side by side in the weekly Monday evening class. The 2018 class focused on poetry. The 2019 class utilizes improvisation and acting in the creation of short plays.

"The course has been an amazingly positive experience," says Dr. Collins. "There was a point on a recent Monday night when I had organized everyone into groups and set them to their task. There were thirty people all together in the room and everybody was talking, sharing ideas and laughing. It was absolute magic to look out and see what had happened—the ease and comfort of the people. Improvisation is a hard thing to do. You have to stand up and take a chance. Everyone was doing this with so much heart." For the University students, "the experience has been transformative," comments Dr. Collins. "Students have told me that initially they were uncomfortable doing improvisation. They found that many of their SLC peers came to the class with less inhibition. They taught the Pace students to let go and have fun."

The SLC participants are "always so happy to be in class," states Dr. Collins. On the first evening of the semester, she recalls standing in the front of the room, introducing herself and explaining how the course would function. "One boy from the Successful Learning Center shouted out, 'Yeah, that's what I'm talking about!' And I thought, 'That is the most positive response anybody has ever given me as a teacher.'"

A full ten years after launching the Successful Learning Center, Ms. Placanica retains her enthusiasm for the endeavor. "It's wonderful," she says. "It's beyond wonderful."

