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Alpha Anniversary : For 60 years the center has been supporting clients with developmental disabilities

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'Of all God's children, these are the most innocent of all.'

Ruth Kallman, 88, of Santa Barbara, loves this quote by songwriter Dale Evans so much she had it engraved on a stone for her son, Cliffy Kallman, who had a severe postnatal developmental disability and passed away in 2000 at the age of 46.

Cliffy was born in 1953 in an era when raising a child with developmental disabilities was taboo.

"At that time, what was protocol was to institutionalize your child," said Kim Olson, executive director of Alpha Resource Center in Santa Barbara. "Many physicians at the time of birth said, 'Don't take your baby home and we'll put him in an institution and you can be on with your life.' "

But Mrs. Kallman was not alone in her desire to keep her child.

Just before Cliffy's birth, three mothers of children with Down syndrome — Edna Dahl, Vera Anderson and Evelyn Stroble — were also taking the courageous and unconventional step to raise their children rather than institutionalize them. They met with three goals in mind: to educate their children, to provide resources and support for their families and to dismantle the stigma against kids with developmental disabilities.

In 1953, they established the Santa Barbara Council for Retarded Children.

Today, the council exists under another name, Alpha Resource Center. The center will celebrate its 60th anniversary with Diamonds & Denim, an evening of cocktails and dancing, 5 to 9 p.m. Saturday at the Carriage and Western Art Museum, 129 Castillo St. Tickets cost \$60.

The center has a lot to celebrate.

"We certainly have witnessed over the last 60 years — and maybe more so over the last 20 years — the acceptance of kids and adults with developmental disabilities," said Ms. Olson. "You're going to see somebody in the workplace, somebody in the shopping center, somebody at the fitness center, somebody in the park with a



Alpha Resource Center offers music classes in its social center for children and adults with developmental disabilities.

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Top photo, in the Alpha Resource Center kitchen, staff member Darla Sturtevant,

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developmental disability. Not that long ago, it was unheard of."

When Mrs. Kallman and her late husband, Bob Kallman, first became involved, the council was using empty rooms at UCSB for its meetings and classes.

"We had a teacher who would read to the children," Mrs. Kallman said. "We had singing. One gal would play the piano."

The program began with two teachers and 10 students.

In 1963, Mr. Kallman, then county supervisor, helped acquire the land off Cathedral Oaks Road from the county where Alpha Resource Center is located today. Parents, county employees and others volunteered to help build the facility.

"People were so relieved there was someplace to go," Mrs. Kallman said.

Like most parents of children with developmental disabilities, Mrs. Kallman had other kids and responsibilities.

"The child who's developmentally disabled is not necessarily the main event," explained Dr. Sey Kinsel, 90, of Santa Barbara. He is a retired pediatrician who worked closely with Alpha, serving about 30,000 children with developmental disabilities over his 38-year career. "There's the family, resources, money, your marriage. There's a number of things."

By watching and teaching their child, the program offered parents time and energy to focus their attention on other responsibilities. It also offered support for parents struggling with the implications of having a disabled child.

"The family had to adjust," said Dr. Kinsel. "If you had a child and thought he was going to be the best football player and he can't walk, well, that's a lot of change."

"One of the major problems of having a DD child is you're out of the mix. Every mother is going to tea and talking about how pretty their little girl is at doing the ballet and all the kids are playing soccer, and your kid's not. It's hard on you and these women recognized and supported each other."

Dr. Kinsel stressed to the mothers after they gave birth that every baby is valuable, no matter his or her intelligence or appearance.

"When you have a child that is physically (or mentally) different, you tell the mother that you've had (say) a little baby girl and she weighs so many pounds. She has a very pretty face ... and she has reddish hair or whatever, but there's something that we do have to talk about."

He would then let the mother hold and love the child before discussing the disability.

Dr. Kinsel referred parents to Alpha, which could help them navigate the difficulties of raising a developmentally disabled child.

Mrs. Kallman said the program provided Cliff and the other children with a rare opportunity to learn and socialize. Cliff participated in the program for four years, from age 3 to age 7, before moving into a more comprehensive 24-hour care program.

"They are very lovable children, all of them," said Mrs. Kallman, a mother of four. "For a child that never got many hugs from other children, it was wonderful for them to have a friend."

Today, Alpha Resource Center continues to provide a number of services for people with developmental disabilities and their families.

We "make sure that family knows that life is good and can be good," said Ms. Olson.

second from left, cooks with Michele Oliner, left, Maria Marino, second from right, and Nancy Batzle, right.

Bottom photo, staff driver Martha Murray, left, takes Alpha participants downtown for their various jobs. Alpha Resource Center assists with employment for adults with developmental disabilities.

STEVE MALONE/NEWS-PRESS PHOTOS



Ruth and the late Bob Kallman assisted in acquiring the property off Cathedral Oaks Road for Alpha Resource Center in 1963.

LORRAINE D. WILSON/NEWS-PRESS FILE



Top photo, Alpha Resource Center participants head out to enjoy a morning in the garden.

Bottom photo, Kim Olson, executive director of Alpha Resource Center, lends a helping hand putting on the shoe of her friend.

STEVE MALONE/NEWS-PRESS PHOTOS

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Some families become lifelong partners of the organization, others come for a short period of time.

Alpha Resource Center serves 125 adults on the South Coast and 1,800 families countywide. It assists clients with varying levels of disability, from those who have significant impairments to those who are high-functioning and have competitive jobs, who come to the center primarily for assistance with money management and social opportunities.

Alpha offers cooking classes, art classes and music classes, as well as recreational programs for children and adults of all ages.

Alpha provides financial planning for adult participants as well.

"One of the biggest fears of families is 'Who's going to look after my child when I'm no longer here?' " said Ms. Olson.

Conservatorship Advocacy & Personal Services (CAPS), a nonprofit organization with a separate board of directors that shares staff with Alpha, establishes special needs trust funds and provides ongoing support for adults whose families are no longer looking after them.

Since Alpha's inception, the stigma against children with developmental disabilities has largely dissipated.

"In the beginning, you were a little ashamed to say you had a retarded child," said Mrs. Kallman. "You were embarrassed to take them down to a store or to a park or to a grocery store because the children are different."

That is no longer the case.

"We have seen a tremendous change in the community's acceptance," said Ms. Olson. "We're much more visible and simultaneously invisible."

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FYI

Alpha Resource Center recently opened Slingshot, a new art studio and gallery in downtown Santa Barbara, where established teachers mentor more than 30 self-taught artists with developmental disabilities. Read more about it in the Nov. 5 News-Press.

IF YOU GO

Alpha Resource Center will celebrate its 60th anniversary with Diamonds & Denim, an evening of cocktails and dancing, 5 to 9 p.m. Saturday at the Carriage and Western Art Museum, 129 Castillo St. Tickets cost \$60. To purchase, call 683-2145 or go to www.alphasb.org/diamonds-and-denim.

For more information about Alpha Resource Center, visit www.alphasb.org.
