

Bridgeways: 25 Years of Hope and Recovery

October 25, 2006

By Vera E. Wildauer



Stop by any of Bridgeways' four facilities, and you'll find a vibrant, positive environment.

At Everett-Madison House, which houses the agency's Mental Health Services and the drop-in center, you'll find clients engaged with their case workers or participating in an interest group; running music lessons or working on the Bridgeways member newsletter. At the Production Shop, located just east of the Everett Boeing facility, clients are developing a variety of manufacturing skills while producing work at the quality of any for-profit concern in the market. At the two small apartment buildings--Bridgeways Place and the Emerald Apartments--clients live independently and are visited regularly by their case workers to ensure they're taking their medications and are successfully navigating society's support systems.

Now twenty-five years old, Bridgeways has managed to find the magic combination of services to help low-income adults with severe and persistent mental illness on their recovery journey. But it didn't quite start that way.

Rainbow Resources: A Place for Work



In 1981, the agency was started by a few entrepreneurial business people as Rainbow Resources. Its mission was to provide vocational training for people with severe and persistent mental illness. The non-profit was essential for another local mental health facility to win a government contract.

Rainbow Resources was launched in a small workshop on Grand Avenue and devel-

oped a variety of work programs to meet their mission. The space was not even 1500 square feet and was set up with used tables and chairs and a tiny nook for the program administrator to work.

"We talked to anyone and everyone looking for projects or tasks they might want to offload," said Vicki Hofmann, who was there early on, and served as Executive Director from 1997 to 2004. "We contracted with a local bakery to sell day-old bread. Clients learned the basics of retail sales." Others learned assembly skills building bait cages for commercial crab pots. But the big breakthrough came when Rainbow Resources secured the initial contract with Boeing through their philanthropic offload program. A crew of just 5 part-time workers built small sub-assemblies for the Everett plant. The work was delivered back and forth--sometimes by Hofmann herself.

Rainbow Resources was unique in Snohomish County in providing work for individuals living with mental illness. There were numerous work programs for people with developmental disabilities, but none focused on adults with mental illness. Dedicated managers worked with clients to create an appropriate schedule.

"Everyone's needs are different," said Hofmann. "And it can vary from day to day. But even if someone can just manage two hours a day, it is a huge accomplishment." Along with flexible schedules, Rainbow sought other contracts providing work for a broader range of client ability--collating printed materials and transferring bulk yarn to large spools were just two examples.

Job volume from Boeing increased and became increasingly complex. Rainbow Resources rented another work space on Colby Avenue and then later moved both facilities into one building at its current location on 75th. Over the years, the agency has been able to add more machinery—and more capability--through careful capital planning. Recently, a generous

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donation allowed Bridgeways to purchase new work tables and ergonomic chairs.

All along, clients have been paid competitive wages for their work. 'Real work for real pay' has been in place since the beginning. In the '80s it was common to pay a small stipend for make-work tasks simply to keep clients engaged, and now some agencies seek governmental exceptions allowing them to pay below minimum wage in order to keep costs low. Rainbow Resources, now Bridgeways, was committed to supporting clients while also giving manufacturing customers the quality and pricing they expect from any other for-profit concern. In 2001, the Production Shop became ISO 9000 compliant and an important goal for 2007 is to achieve full ISO certification.

"There are a number of initiatives underway to transform Bridgeways into a top-notch production facility," says Al Hayden, Director of Manufacturing. "And we're starting to get a reputation as the innovative solution-provider among the various vocational shops throughout Puget Sound."

There's No Place Like Home



While the supportive work environment proved a positive influence on the lives of Rainbow's client workers, staff and the board were struck by the challenges still facing these individuals. Having a safe home and consistent case management was an important component to each person's success and in spite of Rainbow's close association with a local mental health agency, the care was still fragmented. It was obvious that things would simply run better if work, home, and case management were all under the same umbrella.

Careful fiscal management allowed Rainbow Resources to purchase the mental health agency that they already worked with in

1995. They added licenses to provide vocational services, residential services, and outpatient services for adults with mental illness. Rainbow now had three buildings, which were licensed as boarding homes, providing housing for over 100 clients. In addition, residents were provided three meals a day at Everett-Madison House and onsite case management.

Building on a Good Thing

This combination of services--work, housing, and case management--was the foundation for what Bridgeways is today. But staff and the board of directors continued to look for even more ways to improve services and meet the community's needs.

In hopes to broaden the range of jobs available to clients, a janitorial service program was developed. A grounds maintenance program contracted with the Everett Parks and Recreation to help maintain local parks, and served other businesses and individuals as well. For clients who were ready to live and work in community, staff assisted in finding them jobs, apartments or group homes, and outpatient case management services.

"The Recovery Model was really gaining momentum at that time," said Hofmann. "It was increasingly important to place more of our clients in the community. To give them more voice in their care."

A Continuing Evolution



While the mental health industry was looking to become more client-driven, public health funding was getting squeezed. Rainbow Resources had always had a low profile and worked mainly behind the scenes. Now, though, it was important to improve visibility in order to diversify their manufacturing business and to grow the revenue stream from grants and donations. Part of that

was changing the name to Bridgeways to better communicate the agency's role as a bridge between client need and the resources available.

Other forces drove Bridgeways to adjust as well. The economic downturn affected the volume of work in the Production Shop and boarding home regulations tightened so that it was no longer viable for the agency to offer its residential program as a 24-hour supervised facility. Instead, the two smaller boarding homes were remodeled into apartment buildings, and the Everett-Madison House facility revamped into a drop-in center with client-driven groups and classes, and offices for case managers.



community.”

Securing housing in the community is half of Marilyn Baker's job now. She had been the manager of the Residential Program. While you'll still find her at Everett Madison House, carrying a bundle of keys, greeting clients who've dropped by for lunch or a group session, she's also making connections with property managers, organizing landlord luncheons, and serving on the Housing Consortium task force.

“Homelessness is a big topic,” said Baker. “And for our clients, it's a big challenge.” For those individuals who have just been released from the State hospital, Bridgeways offers what everyone here calls 'Unit 9' after the room number it had when EMH was still a boarding house. It's a clean, safe place to sleep for 30 days.

“Some of these people come to us with nothing at all and no idea what to do,” said Baker. “We help them sign up for their government support, help them find a place to live, go

along to the food bank for supplies. Those thirty days make a big difference.”

Meanwhile the workshop is humming along. There are a number of new manufacturing customers--companies in bio-tech, boat building, and general manufacturing. Boeing continues to be an essential partner as well. The Production Shop is getting a makeover now, too, and recently received funds from the Boeing Employee's fund to buy a brand new van for job deliveries--a far cry from the early days at Rainbow Resources when staff loaded parts in their own cars. The best news is that the Production Shop is providing work for more Bridgeways clients than ever.

“That's the best indicator of success we could have,” says Donna Konicki, the current Executive Director. “We've doubled the number of clients working in our shop in just the last six months.” And the client workers are working side-by-side with manufacturing veterans without mental illness. Clients are learning and contributing in a very real way.

“It's getting better every day,” said one client recently. No doubt the original founders would feel the same way.

For more information or to donate to Bridgeways, contact Donna Konicki at (425) 513-8213; or donate online at www.bridgeways.org.

Photos

Bridgeways Administration and Production Shop location.
Worker in Production Shop.
Everett Madison House.
Clients relaxing in front of Everett Madison House.
Bridgeways Place.

Vera E. Wildauer has been a member of the Bridgeways Board of Directors since October 1998, and has served as Board President since May 2002.

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