



Helping Alaskans with Differing Abilities Experience Hope Since 1968

3/8/21

Dear Friends,

The month of March highlights Developmental Disabilities Awareness and Women's History month and provides an opportunity to highlight Nancy Stuart Johnson – a woman whose passion and commitment to children with developmental disabilities had profound impact on disability supports in Alaska.

The history of disability supports in Alaska must never be forgotten, as painful as the story is to tell. Children and adults experiencing disabilities were moved to other states by the State of Alaska due to the lack of appropriate local supports, and grew up in institutions, separated from their families and culture. Once brought back to Alaska, children, adolescents, and adults found themselves in the basement of the Alaska Psychiatric Institute or in Valdez at the state institution Harborview. During this time Nancy moved from Florida to Circle, Alaska with her husband and four children in October 1967, just weeks before the Tanana and Chena rivers flooded.

Nancy volunteered her services to help care for children during the aftermath of the flood and the Department of Health placed a four-year-old with disabilities in her care. Six months later Nancy and her husband Don moved to Anchorage and brought this foster child with them. Her reputation for opening her heart and home for children with disabilities grew, and by August 1968 they were caring for 14 children with developmental disabilities in their home. The State of Alaska informed Nancy she needed to apply for a "institutional license" because of the volume of children she was caring for. Nancy chose "Hope Cottage" for her newly formed organization and made it her goal to support children in neighborhood homes in the community.

Hope Cottage incorporated in 1968, with a focused goal of keeping children and adolescents out of institutions. By the end of 1969, supported by a Board of Directors and growing community partnerships, Hope Cottage was supporting 36 children with developmental disabilities in Anchorage. The volume of responsibility and focus took a toll on Nancy and she removed herself from the operations of Hope in 1970. But the cornerstone she laid—that people experiencing disabilities belong in community, not institutions—has stayed firm as Hope Cottage grew into a statewide organization, becoming Hope Community Resources in 1998.

This month, as we honor women across our country who have forged paths towards greater equality, inclusion and accessibility, we honor Nancy Stuart Johnson and the power of one-woman taking action in a moment in time, resulting in enhanced quality of life for hundreds of people for decades to come.

I, alongside many, share her dream that everyone belongs and has a place of value in their community of choice, and I am profoundly grateful for her answer of "yes, I can help" in 1967. This month we honor that legacy of "yes", committing in her honor to remove barriers preventing anyone with a differing ability from experiencing a meaningful life in community.

Regards,

Michele Girault
Executive Director

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