**50 Years at Foothills Gateway: Residential Services**

*Residential Director, Judy Tomcak, has been a part of Foothills Gateway for almost four decades. Today, Judy shares her experiences working in direct services, focusing on the Residential program where she has spent a majority of her tenure. They say, “home is where your heart is”, and Judy has put her whole heart into the work of helping people with disabilities find “home” for many years.*

* ***When did you begin working at Foothills Gateway (FGI) and what job were you first hired to do?***

I began working at Foothills Gateway in November of 1983. I worked in what was then called the workshop. I was “on the floor”, on my feet all day, and did quality control as well as supported the people in that program, in the same way we do now. A few years later, I became the supervisor for that program and held that job for several years. Around the time the building addition was completed, probably the mid-80’s, the workshop moved into what is now the Production area. I also gained some responsibilities and became a program manager. This job was shared between me and one other person and we basically supported the entire day program caseload. During this time, I was assigned to provide one-on-one support to a few gentlemen who had some significant sensory and behavioral challenges. I had to figure out what worked best for them and through that work, I started what we called the Sensory Integration program. It was like working from scratch to figure out what supports worked best for people with sensory needs and it was pretty fun – that program grew over the years. At that time, Debbie Lapp had been running the Residential program. When she moved over to Case Management in the early 90s, I took over Residential services. We hired Jackie (O’Riordan Leal) about this time to focus on the day programs. This allowed me to fully devote my time to Residential.

* ***Describe the evolution of the Residential program? When did it begin and what did it look like then?***

When I began working at FGI in the early 1980s, most adults in our day programs lived in nursing homes and ICFs (Intermediate Care Facilities). ICFs were a little like a nursing home, but for any age adult with an intellectual disability. As people with disabilities were moved out of these institution-like settings, many “apartment programs” began. The Foothills Gateway apartment program was set up so that several apartments in the same complex were rented and two people who received services would live together as roommates. There was one apartment in the vicinity that served as the staff office. While this seemed like a good alternative to the ICFs, not everyone did well with this set up. Looking for an additional option that would allow people to continue living in a more natural, community setting, FGI started buying houses that would be staffed and provide more supervision and structure for people with disabilities in their homes. Up to three people could live in the home as roommates and we provided staff who were also there. At one time Foothills Gateway owned ten houses and the Residential program had about 100 staff! I’ll never forget that! During that process of helping people who wanted a different residential option than the apartment program, I had several people approach me and ask if they could have someone live with them in their own home – what we now call a Host Home. That model made a lot of sense for many of the people we were supporting, and it was just a natural evolution that brought us there. Today, we almost exclusively support people in Host Homes.

* ***What are some of your fondest memories of the early days of your time at FGI?***

The most fun part has always been the day-to-day, hands-on stuff. I think I benefitted from those close relationships and so did the people I was supporting. I’ll tell you about two memories that stand out.

I mentioned the gentlemen I worked with when I first began the Sensory Integration program. One of them was still in school, I will call him Sam. I loved working with him and the school district. The school staff started out being afraid of him and uncertain how to handle some of his behavior. I was able to work with school staff and help them understand and know Sam better. Once they understood him, his time there was better for everyone, and Sam and I still have a great relationship to this day.

Another great memory, one of the first people I worked with directly in that program was a man I will call Chuck who had an amazing ability to memorize maps; he was very visual. He studied maps and dreamed of going to Greeley because he especially loved their maps – all of the numbered streets and avenues. He basically had the map in his head. One day I decided that Chuck needed to go to Greeley! We spent the day just driving around, getting out, and seeing places. It felt good to have the freedom to do things like that and to do something together that meant so much to him. Being able to support people when they needed it - from helping people’s dreams be realized to providing a temporary host home on occasion - has always been what is special to me.

* ***How have residential services changed for the better in recent years?***

I see that people with disabilities are way more connected to communities now. And they have so much more choice, in all areas: work, day program, residential services, etc. It used to be that everyone just came to Foothills Gateway! Now there are lots of options, including those that FGI offers. The changes over the years were a hard adjustment at times, but it was good. I think, in Residential, we have always done a good job at listening to people, but we are much better at it now than we were in the beginning. PCT (Person Centered Thinking) has helped with that. And people are better self-advocates as well. That is encouraging and I think it means we are going in the right direction.

* ***What impact has PCT had on helping adults with disabilities have the home and life that they desire?***

The skills we have all learned have helped us to help people sort out what is important to them and identify what they want in their lives. PCT skills have also helped us resolve conflicts in a powerful and constructive way. One of the most significant benefits is that regularly using these skills enhances and encourages long term relationships which are super important in residential services. Prior to implementing PCT, we would often have people give up on the living arrangement if even the smallest thing did not go well. We wanted them to realize that just because you have a conflict with someone you live with, you don’t have to move. We use a lot of the tools to create action plans and determine what is working or not working. It doesn’t always fix everything, but it has saved a lot of relationships. In Residential we work hard to make good matches up front and then they are easier to maintain for the long term.

* ***As Foothills Gateway heads into the next 50 years, what are you most excited about for residential services?***

Sometimes it is hard to look beyond some of the challenges we have experienced in recent years, but there has been so much progress and it’s exciting to see how far we have come. I would love to continue offering more placement options to people and keep making creative matches. I hope we continue to make time to further develop quality settings for people who receive our residential services. Making sure they can be independent and have fun and have lots of opportunities by finding the providers who can make it happen for them. I look forward to doing more of that.

It is just so exciting to witness people grow and progress. When they gain confidence, start to speak up, develop and achieve goals, and live the life they want - that’s what it’s all about.