



About the organization, a brief history

Beginnings

More than 40 years ago, the founders of Life Experiences envisioned a place of opportunity for individuals with developmental disabilities. Those founders, including parents of some of the first client-employees of Life Experiences, wanted post-education adults with disabilities to have the chance to train for and work a satisfying job. This employment would meet the individuals at their level of ability and allow the client-employees to earn a paycheck and develop a sense of self-worth.

The concept for Life Experiences captured the imagination of educators, civic organizations, and the community. Thus, in June 1979, Life Experiences opened its first bakery, employing four developmentally-disabled adults, ages 18-45. The Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation awarded operational funding for the organization's first two years, with supporters raising matching funds through events, solicitations, churches, local clubs, and businesses.

Initially, the founders aimed to establish several small businesses where individuals with disabilities would work, with the businesses becoming "self-supporting." The objective of self-sustainability proved too challenging, as high-quality competitive goods were produced at a slower-than-standard pace. Nonetheless, the families, caregivers, and community recognized the value of Life Experiences to the developmentally-disabled population and stepped up to support the organization with donations, grants, and tuition.

Originally, Life Experiences' client-employees represented the most-capable individuals with developmental disabilities. Later, Life Experiences employed a broad spectrum of individuals in the intellectually- and developmentally-disabled population, including those with vision, hearing, and vocal impairments, as well as those with physical disabilities. Demand for client-employee positions at Life Experiences was consistent and substantial since the organization opened.

From the very beginning, the commitment of the client-employees of Life Experiences would make the corporate-world envious. Many employees came to the organization shortly after their public schooling ended and continued to work at Life Experiences until either retirement or health issues required the individual to stop. Families of client-employees made life-long connections to the organization, even after loved ones had moved on from work at LE.

For the first seven years, operations were limited by the size of the Life Experiences facility—a disused building on the Apex Elementary School property which provided space for the first bakery. When the building began to fall into disrepair, a new facility was sought.

In 1986, Life Experiences moved to Cary's South Hills Plaza, where operations were expanded to include the bakery, an alfalfa sprouts growing operation, and a thrift store. The larger facility and broader business operations allowed the organization to serve 38 adults with disabilities.

Purpose-built facility

As the community and organization grew, the need for a new location became apparent. For the next stage of the organization, a new facility was constructed for the LE operations. The Center for Life Experiences was completed and opened in 2002, with over 14,000 square feet of work areas, classrooms, and a multipurpose space. In addition to offering updated fittings and work equipment, the grounds surrounding the facility offered a comfortable setting for the client-employees to engage in recreation.

At the Cary facility, the enterprises included: the bakery, a laundry, subcontracting services, document destruction, and buckwheat hull packaging. The diversity of enterprises allowed Life Experiences to offer employment to a wide-ranging group of persons with disabilities; over 50 individuals in all.

The operations at Life Experiences offered a comprehensive employment and socialization program to adults with disabilities at a low-cost. At the time, there were few local organizations that served this population offering training and employment.

A New Opportunity

With the economic and service challenges presented by the Covid-19 pandemic, the Life Experiences' board made the difficult decision to close the businesses in mid-2021. Life Experiences' facility was then leased to a provider of similar services for adults with I/DD.

Through a strong desire to continue supporting employment and daytime opportunities for adults with I/DD, the mission of the organization was updated: to serve and improve the lives of adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities and their families throughout the Triangle region.

Assisting families with the greatest financial need became the new focus. Recognizing that day programming for adults with I/DD can be cost-prohibitive for families, the Life Experiences' Board of Directors created **LE Scholarships**, which help bridge funding gaps for adults with I/DD.

Many of our scholarship recipients are on the waiting list for the Innovations Waiver. The Innovations Waiver is a home- and community-based Medicaid program providing services and supports for individuals with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities. The waiting list for Waiver support in our area is many-years long.

LE Scholarships subsidize the cost for area day programs by committing to monthly payments, paid directly to programming providers. Through this system, the scholarship does not impact government-assistance programs received by the adult with I/DD.

Applications for LE Scholarships for adults with I/DD were made available beginning in August 2021. In less than two years, the program has grown to fund monthly support for nearly 20 families.

In 2023, the scholarship application process was expanded to offer support for summer camp attendance. Six individuals have benefited from these scholarships in the first year.

The staff and supporters of Life Experiences—as well as other I/DD advocates—believe providing a full-range of opportunities to those in the intellectually- and developmentally-disabled community is essential. By helping families to access local daytime programming, family caregivers can have lives outside of their caregiving responsibilities, including work, social interactions, and keeping professional appointments.

Additionally, Life Experiences' staff and volunteers serve as resource guides, sharing knowledge and advising via phone and email communication. Social media is also utilized to offer resources and engage with the I/DD community.

Leading the organization, the Life Experiences' Board of Directors includes community-based experts, educators, and caregivers for adults with I/DD. Dedicated to serving, these volunteers oversee and support the organization with broad skills, expertise, and financial commitment.

The Future

Life Experiences' goal is to keep Triangle-area adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities engaged in supportive work and program environments. As a result, their well-being improves through: interactions with care providers and friends, maintenance and growth in life skills, and receipt of supportive recreation and socialization.