

# 30 years of offering hope to people overcoming challenges

## Jane Ruff to retire from Hopewell Center

By Kelly Dickey The Herald Bulletin



Don Knight | The Herald Bulletin Jane Ruff is retiring Friday after nearly 31 years as executive director of the Hopewell Center in Anderson. She says attitudes and awareness of people with intellectual or developmental disabilities have evolved in the last 30 years. "It's certainly my hope that I've offered a lot to staff and employees and consumers, but by the same token, I've learned a lot from them," she says.

ANDERSON — Back when Jane Ruff and Connie Kurtz started working at Hopewell Center in 1986, the organization's current location was just a concrete slab.

Now Kurtz gets emotional thinking about the work Ruff has put in and how she won't be around during stressful times to lighten the mood with her wisecracks.

"Connie doesn't know, but one of these days I'm just gonna evaporate," Ruff said jokingly.

But in reality, after 30 years and eight months, Ruff is retiring as executive director of Hopewell Center. Kurtz – who was hired three weeks after Ruff back in the 1980s – will take her place next week.

"I'm sad because we worked closely together and we've become friends," she said.

Thanks to Ruff's leadership, Kurtz said she won't have to overhaul the operations of Hopewell, an organization that assists people – many of whom have intellectual or developmental disabilities – to develop skills to grow and live more independently.

Ruff didn't necessarily plan to end up at an organization like Hopewell – she intended to work with 4-H youth. But opportunities led her to the organization at a time when people with disabilities were often hidden or were institutionalized.

“You can’t just make a declaration and make everyone understand,” Ruff said. “But the more people are exposed and sit next to somebody at church or whatever, it just makes a difference. And you see that people with intellectual and developmental disabilities are just like everybody else.”

Nearly 7 to 8 million Americans – or about 3 percent – of all ages of the general population experience intellectual disabilities, according to a 2016 report by the U.S. Administration on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities. Nearly one in 10 families in the U.S. is directly affected by a person with intellectual disabilities at some point in their lifetime.

Attitudes and awareness have evolved in the last 30 years, Ruff said. Locally, it’s been from a mix of support from allies like Carl and Betty Erskine, employer education, community visibility and Hopewell finding ways to grow. The not-for-profit agency celebrated its 50th anniversary last fall with several hundred families and supporters.

The organization’s campus at 5325 S. Main St. was under construction when Ruff was hired. Now she calls it a hub for clients going out in the community.

In her early days, there was a little bit of programming and three group homes, but now there are more than 100 people through Hopewell who have their own apartments. It used to be common for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities to be placed in state hospitals – often for the duration of their entire lives. Now many live pretty independently.

People used to find jobs hidden behind the scenes as dishwashers. Today they’re hired as store greeters and stock the shelves while stores are open.

“And I think people have come to accept that as just part of the landscape of life, really,” Ruff said.

But she said there’s still a long way to go. There needs to be more integration into the community, and she thinks Kurtz’s ability to connect with people and the community will strengthen those efforts.

“I feel so fortunate to be able to come into an organization that’s in a great place,” Kurtz said. “It’s not like I need to come and move the ship in a different direction.”

Ruff will go on her own path in retirement with plans to travel to places like North Carolina, France and Cuba. But whether she’s traveling or at home making jewelry, she said she’ll carry Hopewell with her.

“We all have something to learn from somebody else,” she said. “It’s certainly my hope that I’ve offered a lot to staff and employees and consumers, but by the same token, I’ve learned a lot from them.”

An open house reception in honor of Ruff’s retirement will be held 2 to 6 p.m. Thursday at Hopewell Center.

*Like Kelly Dickey on Facebook and follow her on Twitter @KellyD\_THB, or call 765-640-4805.*

### **If you go**

What: Open house to honor Jane Ruff

When: 2 to 6 p.m. Thursday

Where: Hopewell Center, 5325 Main St., Anderson