

Published by the Franklin County Board of Developmental Disabilities
"Helping people to live, learn and work in our community"

Love, laughter and a golden milestone

Ask her the secret to 50 happy years of marriage, and Isabelle Laughrey will say there isn't much of a secret.

"Just love," she said. "Love is the same in sickness and health; love is for everybody."

Laughrey and her husband, Clifford, recently celebrated their golden anniversary at a dinner party with friends, hugs, presents and, of course, cake. Though they didn't set out to be marriage pioneers, the Laughreys have long been an inspiration to many in the Franklin County DD community.

They also have shown, by positive example, how important it is for people with developmental disabilities to have the right to marry, said Dynamic Pathways owner Jeanne Stuntz. She and her brother-in-law, Mark Stuntz, have known the couple for decades.

"Having rich relationships in life makes such a difference for us all," Jeanne said. "People with disabilities ought to be able to live the lives they choose—and a lot of times, the system gets in the way."

Clifford, 79, and Isabelle, who soon turns 78, are retirees with modest Social Security incomes. But if they relied on SSI (Supplemental Security Income), as many people with developmental disabilities do today, the so-called "marriage penalty" likely would lead to a significant reduction or loss of much-needed benefits.

Advocates in Ohio and nationwide have been fighting for years to enact legislation that would remove the marriage penalty by addressing outdated asset and income limits, and allow people to wed without sacrificing benefits.

Hannah Norelus, an independent provider, said the Laughreys have shared the same home for some 30 years. "They really are remarkable," she said. "They've come such a long way together."

Clifford and Isabelle say their story began a half century ago when they met at a Columbus grocery store (the now-closed Big Bear). Clifford remembers telling his mother, "Oh, yeah, I'm going to marry her."

Still, he admits, Isabelle was the one who spoke first and eventually popped the question. "We got married at the YWCA," she said. "The date was November 14th."

An enduring willingness to move past challenges seems to be a key to their success, Mark Stuntz said. "One of the things I admire that they are so willing and eager to learn. Mistakes happen, yet they always are able to forgive each other," he said. "As angry as I've seen them at each other, they still show how much they love each other with that same passion."

Natalie Sanchez, the couple's Franklin County DD service coordinator, said Isabelle and Clifford simply "take good care of each other." Isabelle encourages her husband to exercise by taking walks, and they both share a sense of whimsy.

"No matter when I go over there, they are always wearing matching shirts," Sanchez said. "Tie-dye, Halloween, Christmas – they find t-shirts to match."

Isabelle is outgoing and talkative; Clifford usually is quiet, friends say. But on his anniversary, he wasn't shy about his feelings. "She's a good wife," he said, gazing at Isabelle. "I love her too much."



Two Franklin County DD board members re-appointed

The Franklin County Commissioners have re-appointed Franklin County DD board members Michael Underwood and Marci Straughter to four-year terms.

Underwood will start his third, and final, term in January, and Straughter – who made history as the first person with DD appointed to the Franklin County DD board – will begin her second term.

Straughter also was re-appointed in November to serve as a trustee for the Ohio Association of County Boards of Developmental Disabilities.



Disability community salutes Carolyn Knight

Self-advocates throughout the state are paying tribute to Carolyn Knight, whose recent retirement from her job as executive director of the Ohio Developmental Disabilities Council marked the end of more than six decades of service to people with disabilities.



"She was a fighter for justice," said Christine Brown, a member of the Franklin County DD Self-Advocate Advisory Council who often worked alongside Knight.

Knight started her career working with people who lived in group homes, then moved to the Columbus Developmental Center. She became executive director of Ohio Legal Rights Service (now Disability Rights Ohio), leading the legal advocacy organization for 30 years before taking the top job at the Ohio Developmental Disabilities Council.

All along the way, she says, her approach was to speak up and challenge outdated policies. "I never gave up," Knight said for a DD Council story on her career. "If something didn't make sense, I would ask questions. Change only happens when you do."

Self-advocate Ruben Garcia, a member of the Vinton County Board of Developmental Disabilities, said Knight has been both his mentor and friend. "She taught me to listen to all sides, to get everybody's perspective, and that everybody has an opinion," he said. "We all know what we want; everybody just has a different way of getting there."

Garcia said Knight has been a true champion for the disability community. "There are leaders I really, really respect, and she was one of them," he said. "Carolyn was always there when a person with a disability needed her. She always called back."

Service Coordinator Cindy Phillips dedicated to giving

On the job, at home – and long into the future, she hopes – Franklin County DD service coordinator Cindy Phillips aims to make giving a priority. "The tiniest of commitments over time add up to oceans of change," she says.

Phillips recently was inducted into the Legacy Society of the Springfield Foundation in her hometown of Springfield, Ohio. She has planned a legacy gift that will support the Humane Society of Madison County and two scholarship funds: one in her name, and one to honor her late father, Richard.

"I've made serving others a priority even after I'm gone," Phillips said. "It was something I set aside my entire career to leave a lasting legacy, not for myself, but to leave the world a better place than when I entered it."

In addition to working at Franklin County DD, she also is a registered veterinary technician, and volunteers to assist with surgeries and anesthesia at the humane society. She has authored a children's bedtime book, *My Sleepy Hound*, with proceeds benefiting animal charities.



Though Phillips prefers to stay in the background, she is sharing her commitment to giving because she wants others to know that if she can make a difference, they can, too.

Self-advocates invited to holiday meeting

The Franklin County DD Self-Advocate Advisory Council hosts its annual holiday meeting on December 11 with a gift exchange and pizza party.

The gathering starts at 10 a.m. at Franklin County DD, 2879 Johnstown Rd. To take part in the gift exchange, advocates should bring one gift that cost no more than \$10.

RSVP not required, but suggested so that the pizza order is on target. Email ryan.phillips@fcbdd.org or call him at 614-342-5984.



Franklin County self-advocate receives OACB partner award

As one of the best-known and most dedicated self-advocates in Ohio, Christine Brown is often on the frontlines of change. She also strives to inform others, and recently was part of a team honored for efforts to help people with disabilities understand how employment can affect benefits.

Brown and five other disabilities professionals were given the Partners in Excellence Award during the fall conference of the Ohio Association of County Boards (OACB) of Developmental Disabilities.

They were recognized for their work on the F.E.A.R. Factor training series, which helps professionals, families and people with disabilities better understand and overcome fears around losing benefits when pursuing employment. The series name stands for facts, evaluation, action and results.

“We want to break down barriers about fear of going for a job,” said Brown, who works at the Ohio State University Nisonger Center. “Working can really improve health. And there are ways to make it happen.”

She said organizers hope to see more disability professionals and members of support teams attend the virtual trainings so that they can provide accurate, up-to-date information to people with disabilities about how they can have a job and still maintain all or some of their benefits. “We’re interested in teaching people how it all works,” she said.

The other F.E.A.R. Factor winners are Keith Banner, Ohio Department of Developmental Disabilities; Jeanne Ehmke, Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities; Darendra Geer, DBS Consulting; Latosha Olinger, Warren County DD; and Nathan Turner, DODD.



Free tutoring available through Learning Aid Ohio

Families with children on an IEP (Individualized Education Program) can apply now for free tutoring during the spring semester of Learning Aid Ohio.

Learning Aid provides grant funding so that families can access one-to-one, in-person educational support for students. The spring semester runs from January 10 to May 8, 2026.

After receiving approval for a Learning Aid grant, the family member or guardian can browse available tutors in the area that seem like a good fit. Once a match is made, sessions can be scheduled.

Learning Aid grants are open to students who are Ohio residents, on an IEP, and live in families whose household income is less than 400 percent of the federal poverty level.

Get details and apply at www.LearningAidOhio.org
Questions? Email info@learningaidohio.org



Self-advocates turn out for Project STIR training

Franklin County DD had a great crowd for the three-day Project STIR training in November, including some first-time participants.

Led by and for people with disabilities, Project STIR (Steps Toward Independence and Responsibility) helps people learn to speak up for themselves, solve problems, plan for the future and take more control over their lives.

“It was my first Project STIR and it was a beautiful experience. I really appreciated Taylor having me come with her,” said Jasmin Chatman, one of several Franklin County DD service coordinators who went as allies to self-advocates. “There were so many wonderful and valuable connections.”

Franklin County DD and the Ohio Self Determination Association support the trainings. To learn more, visit <https://osdaohio.org/project-stir/>



Franklin County DD Combined Charitable Campaign reaches goal

Franklin County DD staff members gave generously to this year’s Combined Charitable Campaign, pledging more than \$47,200 to help nonprofits meet important community needs.

The agency zoomed past its goal of \$40,700.

Franklin County DD’s campaign was led by Early Childhood Education administrative specialist Anne Albrecht, who headed the effort for the first time—and even jumped in on a last-minute chili cook-off fundraiser. If there was a learning curve this year, it sure didn’t show.

Thanks to her and to all the department coordinators who supported efforts to help staff give as they were able. No contribution is ever too small.

Good For You

Notable achievements in the Franklin County DD community

Congratulations to all the self-advocates and artists whose work graces the new Birds of Encouragement Mural at Advocacy and Protective Services, Inc. And thanks to the Ohio Arts Council for supporting this awesome project.



We are fortunate to have great community support for our families in need. Thanks to Coats4Children, which has been donating warm outdoor wear to us for the past four years so that we have a supply of coats to distribute to families in our Early Childhood program.

The Franklin County DD Early Childhood Education program was honored to welcome representatives from the Department of Children and Youth (DCY) and the Franklin County Family and Children First Council on Nov. 3. We're always happy to highlight our wonderful Early Intervention efforts, and we appreciate the extensive training our staff receives through DCY.

Artists at ARC Voyagers Northeast are once again decking the halls, trees and brightening holidays with homemade ceramic ornaments. Franklin County DD programs appreciate receiving a supply of these gems!



Career Milestones



35 Years
Linda Dudley

25 Years
Laura Patzer

10 Years
Stephanie Mohrman
Dana Watters-James

Dateline

The Franklin County Board of Developmental Disabilities

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Information about Franklin County DD is always available on the internet at:

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Calendar

December, 2025

- 4 Franklin County DD Board meeting, at 5 p.m. at 2879 Johnstown Road, Columbus. Board committee meetings begin at 4 p.m. Please contact Amy Magginis at 614-342-5950 for details.

FCBDD Board Meeting Link:

<https://bit.ly/3JvZSUJ>

- 11 Franklin County DD Self-advocate Advisory Council, meets at 2879 Johnstown Road, 10 a.m. Contact Ryan Phillips to RSVP for this meeting by email at ryan.phillips@fcbdd.org OR by phone at 614-342-5984
- 11 Franklin County DD Early Childhood Learning Community (ECLC) and the Mid-Ohio Food Collective Produce Drive Through at 4:30 p.m. at ECLC, **4141 Rudy Road**, Columbus, 43214. For more details, email Gretchen Uhl at gretchen.uhl@fcbdd.org.
- 18 Franklin County DD Early Childhood Education (**Johnstown Road**) and the Mid-Ohio Food Collective Produce Drive Through at 4:30 p.m. in the ECEFC Bus Lane (accessed via Marilyn Lane). For more details, email Sarah Gillilan at sarah.gillilan@fcbdd.org.
- 22 Winter Recess begins for Early Childhood Education center-based programs and West Central School. West Central classes resume on Monday, January 5 and ECE classes resume Tuesday, January 6.