

FEATURED

## Activity center a place for learning and fun

By Michael Wetzel Staff Writer Mar 13, 2017 Updated Mar 13, 2017

Deb Peters

Peters

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Kim Brookshire

Brookshire

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Staff worker Sallie Smith, right, watches as Bubba Norwood and Alana Sherrill play checkers. [MICHAEL WETZEL/DECATUR DAILY]

MOULTON — Five days a week, about two dozen folks gather to socialize, learn life skills, play games and eat at the Bill Stewart Activity Center.

The group with developmental disabilities considers everyone family and greets visitors like family, too.

Deb Peters, the center's manager, said the clients mostly enjoy playing card games, checkers, horseshoes, and Nintendo Wii games when they aren't learning how to cook, iron, manage money and work with computers.

Client Bubba Norwood said he is the king of checkers, while Renae Quillen and Marcus Coffey usually battle for the championship spot in Wii bowling.

"And when the weather breaks, they'll be outside planting vegetable gardens," said Peters, who has worked with the center for 14 years. "Everyone has his or her favorite activity — games, cooking, cleaning, eating." The center has seven raised garden beds and two greenhouses for gardening.

A 20-by-30 covered patio with five tables, four ceiling fans and benches is a favorite "good-weather spot" for the clients, Peters added.

She said 25 clients, ages 21-66 from Lawrence County, are enrolled at the center.

The Arc of Lawrence County, a group that promotes and protects the rights of people with disabilities, owns the center at Court Street and Morgan Street. The facility moved from Gordon Drive to its present site in May 2005.

Bill Stewart was a longtime proponent of people with developmental disabilities and volunteered his time and gave money for the program when the activity center was on Rosenwald Drive in the 1970s and 1980s.

Brad Romine, chief executive officer for the Centers For The Developmentally Disabled North Central Alabama Inc., said his organization administers the center program.

"Through the program, participants are able to develop stronger work habits and skills, helping them to gain greater independence," Romine said. "Each individual has a person-centered plan to ensure the skills and goals they are working to achieve are meaningful to them personally."

He said the Alabama Department of Mental Health and Medicaid funding dictates the number of clients. Romine said the Stewart Center's annual operating budget is \$279,000.

"We have the capacity to serve additional individuals at the Bill Stewart Activity Center, but there is a lack of funding to pay for the services at the state level," Romine said. However, he said, the center is available to take clients whose families pay for services. He said costs range from \$30 to \$90 a day depending on the needs and services the individual client requires.

Peters said the center is large enough to accommodate twice the number of clients enrolled. She said some clients are paid minimum wage and do chores around the center about two hours a week.

Volunteer Judy Henry, whose son Michael was a client before his death at age 39 in 2006, said the clients also enjoy field trips and new activities.

"It doesn't take much to make them happy," she said. She said the center has a workshop that is inactive because of recent state restrictions.

"We're always looking to fundraise for field trips," Kim Brookshire, qualified developmental disabilities professional, said at the center last week. "The most important thing here is socialization, that's No. 1. We want the clients to learn life skills and be as independent as possible and be part of the community. We want the people here to know they can make a difference in the community and not just exist."

She said this year a field trip to the U.S. Space and Rocket Center in Huntsville is planned.

In the past, the clients and staff have visited Chattanooga and Birmingham. A couple times a year the clients and staff go to a local restaurant to eat, the staff said. "Rest of the time, the clients bring lunch from home," Peters said.

The staff said the Beta Club of Moulton Middle School and some civic groups and garden clubs have made donations and provided services to the center in recent years.

The biggest needs for the center include donations, volunteers and a pool table, Peters said.

"We've been looking to secure a pool table," she said. "We have the space and the clients are eager. If anyone has a pool table they are not wanting anymore, please contact us."

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