

In the summer of 1996, a committed group of advocates who were part of a larger organization, DIAL Center for Independent Living, based in Clifton, NJ, came together to advocate for a free-standing Center for Independent Living in Northwest NJ. This group, known as DIAL Northwest, felt the communities of Morris, Sussex and Warren counties would be better served by a local Center for Independent Living, one that understood the nature and needs of suburban and rural communities. Through their hard work, approval was granted by the DIAL, Inc. Board of Directors; the Statewide Independent Living Council (SILC), the NJ Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (NJDVRS) and the Rehabilitative Services Administration (RSA) and a new Center for Independent Living was formed. In December of 1996, Disabled Advocates Working for Northwest (DAWN) was incorporated and in June of 1997, received its 501(3) (c) status from the Internal Revenue Service. On October 1, 1997, DAWN officially opened its doors and began serving people with disabilities, their families, and the community-at-large. In 2005, the Board of Directors strategically voted to change the agency name from Disabled Advocates Working for Northwest, Inc. to DAWN Center for Independent Living, Inc and a formal name change was approved by the State of New Jersey in October of 2005.

I had the privilege of joining DAWN in 1999. I had spent the previous 8 years tirelessly advocating for my daughter, who was born with significant disabilities, to ensure she received an appropriate education and the health care she was entitled too. I could not believe how difficult it was to get her the services she was entitled and eventually I decided I wanted to assist other families of children with disabilities in learning how to navigate a very complex system.

This world of social services and disability was foreign to me. I came from a corporate world where resources were abundant and was shocked to see that our most vulnerable individuals were supported on shoestring budgets.

I remember the day I saw the ad for a part time position providing information and assistance to individuals with disabilities and their families. That organization was DAWN and as I started to learn about the organization and its mission, it was an “ah hah” moment for me. I wanted my daughter to have choices and opportunities in her life. I was so excited to find a place that shared my beliefs and focused on an individuals’ interests and abilities. I was tired of hearing professionals constantly focusing on what she couldn’t do or would never do. Imagine having those kinds of conversation about your typically developing child. Imagine having those conversations about any child. I had never heard of Centers for Independent Living but I knew I wanted to be a part of this organization.

As a Center for Independent Living (CIL), DAWN practices the Independent Living philosophy which states that people with disabilities should have the same civil rights, choices and control as do people without disabilities. Since joining the DAWN team, the board and I have worked tirelessly to ensure the countless individuals with disabilities we serve get the information they need so they can make informed choices and live their life as independently as possible in the community of their choosing with the appropriate supports.

As a CIL, DAWN is one of over 500 non- residential organizations nationally and more worldwide designed and operated to provide services to individuals with all types of disabilities

across the lifespan. The CIL's are charged with providing Information and Referral, Advocacy, Peer Support, Independent Living Skills Training, and transition services. In addition, each CIL is charged with identifying gaps in services in their local community. DAWN has taken this charge very seriously and with a carefully executed strategic plan, we have methodically and thoughtfully expanded organizational capacity to ensure our community has a comprehensive and robust system of service opportunities available to them.

With each new opportunity we embarked upon, it was mission critical to ensure that the services we delivered were always delivered with that underlying core value and philosophy of equal access, equal opportunity and informed choice. Over the years, we have implemented programming to better serve our communities from enhanced Independent Living services, early intervention services for children 0-3, life skills and employment readiness programming and comprehensive care management.

In spite of our significant growth over the years, we still are a well-kept secret. People often find us after they have made numerous calls trying to navigate a very complex and splintered system. The disability service system in NJ is a minefield for people to maneuver. There is no common entry point for an individual to be pointed to. Dependent upon the nature of the disability (which is extremely broad) and the onset of disability, an individual's entry into this complex system varies contingent upon their particular situation. That is why Centers for Independent Living are so critical to the service system. We are the only federally mandated organizations charged with serving individuals of all ages and all disabilities. We are consumer driven, meaning that we provide information and guidance but the individual is driving the bus and is the master of their plan. And our board and our staff are made up of a majority of individuals with disabilities or individuals with a family member living with a disability. We come to the table with life experience that makes a significant impact in the way we serve our community. We get it!

Over the past 25 years, DAWN has grown, expanding its services based on the needs of the communities we serve, and supporting thousands of individuals each year. None of this would have been possible without the dedication of a committed group of volunteers who make up the board of directors as well as the incredibly talented team of individuals that work tirelessly each day to help DAWN accomplish its mission. All of these individuals, both past and present have helped DAWN achieve this significant milestone. It has been my honor and privilege to have been a part of this incredible journey and I look forward to what the next part of our journey has in store.

Come join us as we begin our 25th anniversary celebration on October 13th at Vasa Park.

With gratitude and appreciation!

Carmela Sliwinski
Executive Director