

Kathi Sargent is the longest-term employee with The Arc of Weld County, starting as an Office Assistant in 2008 and adding the Community Ambassador job duties in 2016. Kathi has long been proficient in office maintenance and telephone support, but she really excelled when she started educating the community regarding out no-cost advocacy services via direct marketing, supporting community events, and educational presentations.

However, in March 2020, Kathi's employment changed from fully in-person to fully virtual, literally overnight. The transition was not easy, but Kathi and her team stuck through it and now you would never guess that she hadn't always worked remotely. In fact, she is now highly independent on her laptop, having had no experience on such a device prior to COVID. Kathi is proficient with the agency's online scheduling platform, email, as well as Zoom and Microsoft Teams.

After returning to the office in a hybrid work from home model, Kathi has again resumed many of her in-person job duties, while still expanding her tech knowledge, both in and outside of the office. This September, Kathi returned as a repeat participant in The Arc of Weld County's tech coaching with Code Ninjas, exploring the world of game coding! Kathi self-confesses she can sometimes be hard on herself when learning new technology, "Just starting can make you nervous, but keep working on it and you get comfortable with it."

Kathi's work outside of the office has also been impacted by her tech coaching, as she shops almost exclusively online now and has tried food delivery several times for special occasions. Unfortunately, not all experiences have been bright. Recently, while requesting professional tech assistance to repair an issue in her home, Kathi felt pressured into making a tech purchase she did not want nor was prepared to use. While the issue has been resolved Kathi, who is a strong woman and advocate for herself and others, reminded us that situations like this can occur when we least expect it. "It is ok to ask for help and feel confident to say no." Technology opens so many opportunities, but you must remain focused on appropriate use and interaction, as well as your safety. If you need help, family, friends, and organizations like The Arc of Weld County can help.

The Arc of Weld County promotes and protects the human rights of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) through advocacy and support services. As a small, grassroots organization, our vision is for everyone to participate in their shared community as they self-determine. We strongly believe that employment is a catalyst for anyone, regardless of ability, to achieve that American dream. Consequently, The AWC has been a local community leader in Northern Colorado championing the cause and value of inclusive employment for people with IDD. Nearly 25% of The AWC staff are individuals with IDD. To ensure their full integration and success, The AWC built into our business model job development supports via the employee's immediate supervisor. Kathi Sargent is such an employee and as the second longest-term employee in the history of The AWC, since December 2008, she embodies the successful opportunities created within inclusive employment.

Kathi came to our agency after working as a Courtesy Clerk at Kmart for over ten years, where she earned two awards for employment tenure. At the time she was hired at The AWC, Kathi was our only Office Assistant and her duties included in-office administrative needs including greeting visitors, answering and transferring phone calls as well as preparing for Board meetings. Her duties also supported the overall cleanliness of the general office space and board room. As the agency grew, so did Kathi's contributions as an employee. She remained focused on performing her job duties with detail and precision, while supporting The AWC to better understand the needs and desires of people with IDD, their families, and our community.

As mentioned, Kathi started as an Office Assistant in 2008, however her role expanded to include the position of Community Ambassador in May 2014. In this newly defined role, Kathi worked throughout the community educating people and businesses regarding The AWC and the services we provide. This new role was a natural extension into who Kathi is, as she is a lifetime resident of Weld county and a highly recognized member of our community. Kathi's community engagement spans more than as an employee of The AWC, as she is a staunch

community advocate within her civic duties as a ten plus year member of the Envision Board of Directors (the local area Community Center Board) and a member of the Participant Directed Programs Policy Collaborative within the Department of Healthcare Policy and Finance for the State of Colorado for the last several years.

However, on March 13, 2020, Kathi's life abruptly changed. Within the seemingly overnight transition to safer-at-home orders across Colorado as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, Kathi found herself in a new and unpredictable situation both personally and professionally. In what seemed like an instant, Kathi became isolated in her home with her husband. Her work life was disrupted, as The AWC physical offices were closed, and her long-time service provider agency permanently commenced all operations; providing multiple months of disruption in her independent living supports and community connections. Although Kathi remained employed, she was unable to perform her job duties as she had previously done both in the office and out in the community. As the pandemic continued to extend, hopes for a quick return to life as normal were dashed and The AWC began strategizing with Kathi as to how incorporate her talents into our new telecommute employment model.

As with many challenges Kathi has faced throughout her life, she recognized the opportunity to grow in ways she may have never fully considered and continued to be a leader for inclusive employment. This transition was difficult at times, as prior Kathi's experience with technology was limited. To further exacerbate this challenge, Kathi required a new working device to meet her telecommuting needs; a laptop rather than the desktop she used exclusively while working in the office for so many years.

However, with support from her immediate supervisor and The AWC's contracted IT vendor, Kathi did just what she does best, she clearly and effectively advocated for her needs to ensure she remained gainfully employed during these challenging times. She engaged in

virtual IT troubleshooting and participated in continued training opportunities with her immediate supervisor. Now Kathi's job duties have expanded exponentially from general clerical work to include reengagement with the now remote community meetings, as well as supporting the redevelopment and expansion of The AWC community outreach efforts. Kathi now supports the facilitation of our agency virtual employee coffee chats, to promote connectedness amongst our team during this time of disconnectedness, as well as our bi-monthly virtual Check-In with Friends for self-advocates to remain engaged with The AWC and one another. Kathi also became a co-facilitator for the first ever virtual Project Illumination class, a short series focused on mental health and awareness for adults with IDD. As a former participant, she provides invaluable insights into class development and improvement, while encouraging self-advocate participation. Additionally, she supports our agency's fundraising efforts through Colorado Gives Day's fundraising campaign pages. To consider these outcomes remarkable would be understating the true value of the experience, however, Kathi sees it as doing what she needs to do to get the job done while tirelessly pursuing the mission of The AWC.

Although Kathi has been a longstanding representation of the value of the employment of people with disabilities, she is now a model for inclusive employment within the virtual workplace. Kathi's experiences and successes demonstrate that with the right supports and access to virtual technology, anyone is able to become an employed member of our society within our virtual world. Although this journey was difficult, Kathi wouldn't have it any other way. "Learning how to use technology and different devices makes me feel happy that I am able to show people that anyone can overcome the challenges and fears of learning new things and they can be successful too."

Furthermore, Kathi's newly acquired skills have expanded her life in so many more ways than just employment. During this time Kathi has become proficient in her online banking including managing her checking, savings and other accounts; something she could not do prior to the pandemic. She has become skilled in online shopping, reducing her reliance on care providers to understand the products she needs and prefers. Kathi has also ventured into online gift shopping for her loved ones, an opportunity she cherishes and appreciates when she cannot physically give a gift to those most important in her life.