Written by Laura Stetser
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EGG HARBOR TOWNSHIP – Deborah Davies, CEO of The Arc of Atlantic County, expects to have a hard time retiring after her final day on Friday, Jan. 4.

She said she will probably need a least a few weeks to get used the fact that she no longer holds the position she has held dear for 29 years.

“I’ve been telling my staff that toward the end of January, I am giving them permission – it is fine – for them to come up to me and say, ‘Debbie, you can’t come in here every day anymore. You don’t work here anymore,’” she said with a laugh.

“Everything about this job is wonderful. I’ve loved this job, always have,” Davies said.

As Davies leaves to enjoy retirement with her husband, Marc Lowenstein, who retired from his job as associate provost at Stockton College in June, she said will likely take some time to adjust and stay involved in other activities. In the meantime, the search is still under way for her replacement.

Since Davies became CEO, the organization grew from being a small grassroots organization with an annual budget of $400,000 to a diversified social service corporation with an $11 million budget that employs more than 250 people and serves 700 clients and their families.

The Absecon resident sat down with The Current in advance of her retirement to talk about

how social issues surrounding people with intellectual and developmental disabilities have changed in the nearly three decades since she took over, as well as her hopes for the future of the organization and those it serves.

“In many ways you can see today in 30 years ago because we talked about and believed in the move from institutions,” she said. “The question about whether people with disabilities can live in the community was on the table and still is on the table.”

She said people today, particularly those served by the Arc, have higher expectations of themselves and higher expectations for their own lives.

Davies said she does not believe institutionalization is ever the answer, but with many institutions now closed, especially those that cared for children, there needs to be community support in place to supplement the care required by those individuals.

“The doors to institutions have been shut to young children, but it doesn’t mean they don’t need something. So services have to be there for families. They need to have support available to them, and it’s just not adequate right now.”

A former Stockton faculty member, Davies said she started learning from clients almost immediately upon taking the position despite having an academic background in psychology and cognitive disabilities.

“Watching people as they come out of an institution and go into a group home, I saw blossoming. I saw a different person emerge from what was on the paperwork. I would say that they behaved that way because they were in an institution. I knew that was going to happen; I believed in that. What I wasn’t prepared for was that there was every bit of growth and blossoming and change when they moved from a group home into an apartment.”

She said she initially believed that the group living experience would be satisfying enough for the clients, but she quickly learned that the clients could inform their own paths.

“Our organization really is here to support people in the lives they want to live, rather than bringing people into a system that they are now in. There’s a lot more to be done to make that a reality,” Davies said.

Over the years, and with the help of federal housing anti-discrimination legislation, the public perception has changed for the better, she said, but work is still needed to offer clients more inclusion in the community.

Among her achievements at the Arc’s helm, Davies said she is proud of the creation of a human rights committee that reviews complaints and provides due process for clients, of continuing to learn and grow by volunteering for pilot programs and initiatives, and of the organization’s voluntary accreditation by the Council on Quality and Leadership, an accrediting body for organizations that provide services to people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

“That demonstrates a commitment to quality that is internal. It created and supported our culture – the kind of agency we are, the focus on choice for people, and respect.”

Changes in education and social acceptance will carry those with disabilities further, she said.

“I don’t know how we can expect neighbors and adults and coworkers to think that suddenly it’s fine to interact with a person with a disability when their whole school life they are separate,” she said. “The more inclusive you can be, the broader your perception will be. I think it’s a lot to expect adults who are interacting with adults with disabilities for the first time to be able to do that. But if you start when you’re 4, always knowing that there are people around you that have a different style of learning, people to help and you get to help, I think that makes a huge difference.”

It is also important to let them help the community, she said.

“One of the important things to any of us is that we feel needed, that we feel that we contribute to our world, and the folks that we serve have not always been given that opportunity,” Davies said.

When working with people, there are always “unfinished projects,” she said, and as she leaves the organization, it is facing a major change to its funding system. She said she hopes that the next leader will continue her vision of being engaged in the community as a small business.

“There’s plenty to do without ever leaving your doors, but I hope that we continue to develop a perception that we contribute to the community and we care about the issues,” Davies said. “This organization has warmth and a welcoming passion, and we like what we do. We like who we are.”