



Living, Learning,  
Working and Playing  
with Assistive Technology

ST  
net  
Assistive  
Act Prog  
You Through



# *Re-Connecting to Yourself and Your Community*

**Centers for Independent Living –  
Celebrating Individuality, Promoting Choice  
and Advocating for Inclusion**

By Tiffany, Johnston,  
Executive Director, WOIL

**I**ndependent Living Centers across America are little-known places where many of the same principals of freedom, equality and liberty that guided our forefathers in writing the Declaration of Independence are put into action everyday. Community based, and focused on the personal goals of individuals with disabilities, centers for independent living (CILS) provide a wide array of services to anyone who personally identifies as having a disability regardless of their age or what that disability is. The outcome may not be a national Declaration of Independence, but for individuals with disabilities who

utilize their services, the personal impact may seem just as magnanimous and liberating.

Disability does not discriminate. Injury or sudden illness can come upon anyone at any time. It impacts professionals, homemakers, the young and the old. One key to overcoming such life-changing events is to find ways to stay connected to who you are as a person, establish personal goals and explore the resources in your community. Independent Living Centers, located throughout the country, are a great source to renew or support your aspirations. Unique to other organizations, CILS are staffed and managed by a majority of people who also

have significant disabilities. This is important to the philosophy of CILS because peer mentoring is one of four core services provided by any CIL. The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 establishes CILS and the guidelines by which they should operate. Centers are to be consumer controlled, non-medical, non-residential and provide the additional core services of information and referral, advocacy and life skills training. While each CIL provides core services and has a philosophy that unites them, each CIL is also different because it is grown and nurtured from the community it serves. Take a glimpse into the history, service, and testimonies of a few in the Southeast. →

# Walton Options for Independent Living

Augusta, Georgia and Aiken, South Carolina  
Service Area: Primarily Eastern Georgia and Western South Carolina  
[www.waltonoptions.org](http://www.waltonoptions.org)

Interestingly named after George Walton, a native Augustan and the youngest signer of the Declaration of Independence, Walton Options for Independent Living, Inc. (WOIL) is one of over 300 CILS across the country. Serving 16 counties in East Georgia and 10 counties in West South Carolina, WOIL was created when the CEO of Walton Rehabilitation Hospital and several citizens with disabilities saw an opportunity to provide more than just a treatment plan to patients. WOIL was an opportunity to expand the continuum of services by acknowledging that life with disability extends beyond the medical facility and it may or may not begin with a stay in a rehab facility. The non-profit organization became incorporated in Georgia in September 1994 and has assisted thousands of people with disabilities in Georgia and South Carolina. As the executive director of Walton Options, I am proud to say that this year we are celebrating 15 years of inspiring others not to let perceived

limitations discourage them from pursuing their hopes and dreams. The definition of independence is very individualized for us; it's not the same for every person, and it certainly may change as people feel more confident and discover more opportunities through our resources and examples.

Independent Living Advocates support the individual in expressing their personal goals and then connect to the various resources available that will support the achievement of their own independence as they define it. "It's a personalized Declaration of Independence," says Wanda Padgette. Wanda was a nurse who suddenly had a severe medical condition that took away her ability to hear, as well as some of her physical capabilities. She has benefited from a cochlear implant, which is a surgical device that, when worn, restores some of her hearing. One day, Wanda came through the doors of the WOIL North Augusta office seeking

information on work benefits. What she found was much more, and the experience was different than any she had encountered at other agencies. At WOIL, she was able to talk about what she wanted for herself and she found resources that she did not know existed. There were not loads of forms that had to be completed before she could get someone to speak to her. After some time, she found a position posted at WOIL and filled out an application. After several interviews, she became employed as an Independent Living Advocate.

When I first talked with Wanda and she shared her experience, she told me that when she first lost her hearing, her most immediate thoughts were about her role as a mother, and how that would change. Communication and understanding are important factors in any relationship,

especially between a parent and child. "I wish I had

known about Walton Options then because most everything I found out was by





Sarah Parker has re-connected to the work force after receiving help from WOIL.

accident or hard search. Having a peer mentor would have been very reassuring and supportive. I didn't realize there was a resource right here that could help me connect, and now I want to make sure everyone knows. Being out in the community in this capacity, I am continually surprised that people are not aware of the resources or if they know about a resource, they

her way back into the nursing profession, but for now is putting her talents and experience to work by helping in the WOIL nursing home transition department. Cyndy Anzek is Wanda's supervisor and states that she is encouraged that Wanda is looking beyond employment with Walton Options because that means that she sees there are opportunities

around. Like Wanda, Sarah happened across Walton Options by chance when doing Internet research on home modifications. Sarah needed resources that would make her home accessible for her. She found Walton Options as a local resource for home modifications and assistive technology. When she connected to Walton Options, she also found

*I wish I had known about Walton Options then because most everything I found out was by accident or hard search.*

may be having trouble accessing them or understanding how to access them. I want people to be educated. Walton Options is a conduit to so many things." Wanda did research for herself and she determined that a cochlear implant was the option she wanted to pursue. She says, "it's not the answer for everyone, but for me, it was a miracle." Wanda now finds she is acting as a peer mentor for others who are considering this procedure. Ultimately, Wanda wants to find

regardless of her disability. Sarah Parker has a story similar to Wanda's. Both are mothers, wives and professionals. She too found herself in a life-changing situation and despite the challenges she was given, she has taken a new path and is redefining herself and accepting her disability as a part of who she is. Sarah found out in 2003 that she had a lower lumbar degenerative condition that required having back surgery twice. Left with physical weakness, Sarah uses a scooter throughout the day to get

resources for a vehicle lift. She then attended skills training classes at the center and after applying for a posted position, she too was offered a job to do community outreach and skills training. Today she still drives to work utilizing those vehicle modifications she found through the WOIL resources. While this role is different from her original profession in retail management, she finds great satisfaction with her connection to her community. →

# Center for Independent Living of South Florida

Service Area: Primarily Miami-Dade County  
[www.softacil.org](http://www.softacil.org)

Sunshine and beaches are features that draw people to live in South Florida. You can almost count on four seasons of great weather, but if you have ever lived in a coastal area, or in Florida, then you know about that fifth season that puts us all on alert, Hurricane Season. Miami-Dade County was devastated after Hurricane Andrew blew through in 1992. The challenges and struggles of living without electricity, swift medical treatment and permanent shelter are severe and only magnified if disability is part of the equation. The Center for

immediate. The group began by helping women with disabilities to receive adapted equipment that was destroyed during the storm. They assisted by purchasing the equipment and referring them to existing community resources using a \$1,000 grant from the Women's Fund of Miami-Dade County. From these inauspicious beginnings, the center grew from a few volunteers to a paid staff of 30; from a one-room rented office to a 15,000 square-foot facility; and from a \$1,000 annual budget in 1994 to a \$2.3 million budget in 2009. From its creation to the present time, CILSF has never deviated from its

disabilities nationwide.

The Center promotes and practices an independent living philosophy of peer role modeling, self-determination, equal access and advocacy to maximize leadership, independence, productivity and full inclusion of people with disabilities in society. The foundation of the Center is based on the four core services like other centers. Around the core CIL foundation, CILSF has built a full range of independent living supports that fulfill the organization's mission to accomplish both individual and systems change by creating an environment where

*Recently the center proudly began its newest program: Innovate and Navigate Veteran's Employment via Support & Training (INVEST!)*

Independent Living of South Florida (CILSF) was founded in 1993 like many other CILs, through the grassroot efforts of a few volunteers who recognized a need that was

primary focus of providing direct services at no cost to people with disabilities in Miami-Dade County and advocating for systems change that will benefit all people with

opportunities exist for individuals with disabilities to maximize their individual and group potential. They accomplish this by recruiting and training individuals with





disabilities to serve on committees, alliances, coalitions, advisory boards and boards of directors to influence disability policy and funding in their community. Currently, 62 volunteers and paid staff are making a difference in the way people with disabilities are perceived and the way money is allocated to help people with disabilities reach greater independence in their communities.

Recently the center proudly began its newest program, Innovate and Navigate Veteran's Employment via Support and Training- INVEST! Kelly Green, Director of CILSF, states, "because veterans have invested their lives in our country, and with support from The Able Trust, CILSF is investing in the futures of veterans. With so

many people in the armed services returning with polytraumatic disabilities, amputations, physical, sensory and emotional wounds such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, it became evident that CILSF needed to reach out to our new comrades."

Toriano Johnnie is the Veteran's Project Navigator for CILSF. He states, "INVEST is empowering veterans who have experienced difficulties in finding a job." Together, the veteran and Mr. Johnnie complete an interview and assessment of the veteran's needs, skills, interests, abilities and barriers. After a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) analysis, the veteran is referred to appropriate services such as Vocational Rehabilitation,

the Division of Blind Services, the Veteran's Administration Healthcare System and other community supports. Mr. Johnnie may also assist with the related services that veterans may need in order to obtain employment including housing, transportation, child care, adaptive equipment, health care, counseling, interpreting services, benefits planning and a myriad of other things.

The INVEST program and other services of CILSF are the means that assure the center is meeting one of its goals of providing collateral independent living services that empower people with disabilities to achieve self sufficiency and self reliance. →



Sharon Woody is able to connect with peers via the internet and the CyberPALS Program.



# *Pathways for the Future and Western Alliance Center for Independent Living*

**Sylva and Asheville, North Carolina Service area: Western North Carolina  
[www.pathwayscil.org](http://www.pathwayscil.org)**

**I**n 1991, a new organization was formed in one of the most beautiful, but rugged areas of our country. Pathways for the Future began with a focus on creating accessibility in this beautiful area along the Blue Ridge Parkway. Barbara Davis, Executive Director of

the lodge and recreational areas are totally accessible and persons with various disabilities are able to enjoy the beauty of the rugged national forest.

Since then, Pathways has grown and evolved into an organization with a far broader focus of providing services to individuals with disabilities

Clay, Cherokee and Graham.

In 1999, Pathways was awarded another grant from the Department of Education to open an additional Center in Asheville serving Buncombe, Henderson, Madison, McDowell, Polk, Rutherford and Transylvania counties. The CIL, called Western Alliance Center For Independent

*CyberPals has given me the opportunity for social networking, furthering my education, information and personal growth.*

Pathways, states that Pathway's mission in the beginning was directed primarily toward the development of the Balsam Lake Lodge Recreation Area in the Roy Taylor National Forest in Jackson County. Pathways was responsible for coordinating thousands of hours of volunteer labor in addition to a significant amount of donated materials and funding to develop this model project. Due to the efforts of Pathways For The Future,

by becoming a Center for Independent Living (CIL). Consistent with the definition of a Center, as cited in Section 702 of the federal Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Pathways is a consumer-managed and controlled, community-based, cross-disability, non-residential, non-profit organization. This center provides the four core services in the far western counties of Haywood, Jackson, Macon, Swain,

Living (WACIL), is a stand-alone center providing the four core services with an advisory board.

Pathways and WACIL are dedicated to increasing independence, changing attitudes, promoting equal access and building a peer support network in Western North Carolina through the use of community education, independent living services and advocacy. Richard Jackson received assistance to move from

a nursing home into his own apartment. After living in a nursing home for over 15 months, Richard says, "It's great to be independent and to be by myself." Fay Palmer has received services from Pathways. Fay says, "After receiving peer support and information and referral services, I have been able to go back out into the community and not worry about what people think about me. I feel I am just as important as the next person." Fay's comment is very powerful because one of the hardest things to overcome is worrying about what other people are thinking or how they are judging you. The wonderful thing about centers for independent living is the peer model. There is something very motivating about seeing other people with diverse disabilities being comfortable with whom they are when at work, home, school and or other places in the community. CIL staff are willing to share their successes and challenges because both are part of life.

Recognizing the importance of connectivity, especially in a location where mountains, forests and rivers are natural barriers to access, a place where people understand what you mean when you say "longer than a country mile," the CIL has a program created to help link peers – CyberPals. The CIL places donated computers with individuals and provides them



Richard Jackson has moved from a nursing home into his own apartment with the help of WACIL.

training—and information to connect to the CIL and others. The program has operated for over 10 years and has grown into a large Cyber Peer Network Group. Carla McMahan and Sharon Woody are participants. "CyberPals has given me the opportunity for social networking, furthering my education, information and personal growth. I explore and learn different things and feel this would never have been possible without a program such as Pathways", said Carla. Sharon adds, "The computer has opened up new doors for me and I have a real bond with the others who participate." Both emphasize the importance of peer relationships and the value of sharing experiences and resources with others.

CILS across the country have similar examples. While the content of a CIL program will vary, the goal is the same – producing a more accessible world and enabling people with disabilities to take their place in it. CILS provide people the tools, support and information. Regardless of how you define independence, it encompasses controlling and directing your own life; taking risks and being allowed to succeed and fail; having opportunities to participate in all aspects of community life; making decisions and taking responsibility for your actions; exercising the greatest degree of choice about where, how and with whom you live; asserting your rights and responsibilities as an equal citizen. WWW.ILRU.ORG provides a map with a link to the centers in each state.

Be encouraged to check for the location of a CIL in your area. It's probably the best kept secret in your community. ♿

## Share Your Successes!

### You're **Hired!**

**I**n today's economy, it may feel hopeless to find a job, especially after experiencing a disabling injury or illness. By working with CILs in their communities, the individuals featured in this article have been able to re-invent themselves and have found meaningful employment. We invite you to share your stories. Send a photo of yourself in your workplace, along with your name, address, a description of your job and your thoughts/comments on your path to employment. You may be featured in one of our upcoming issues. Don't forget to include your email and phone number in case we need additional information. Please send information to Walton Rehabilitation Health System, 1355 Independence Drive, Augusta, GA 30901, attn: Walton Independent or email to: [dbergmann@wrh.org](mailto:dbergmann@wrh.org)