

The Boca Raton Tribune

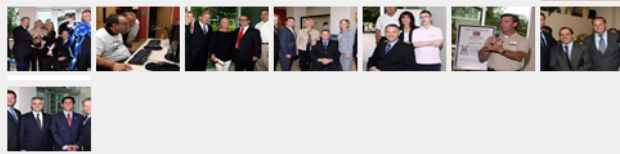
Your Closest Neighbor

June 2010

Stand Among Friends debuts new Assistive Technology Lab to aid disabled



Shown from left are Joe Pores (Call 4 Health), Joseph Bensmihen (Boca Home Health), Jonathan Sahn (Golish Financial Group) and Dawn Hicks (Stand Among Friends).



Rating 3.00 out of 5 ★★★★★ [?]
By Dale M. King

BOCA RATON — Imagine a legally blind college student being able to live the dream of becoming a graphic designer, or a person paralyzed from a car accident being able to find his or her dream job in the computer field and, again, able to support his or her family.

Stand Among Friends (SAF) has debuted a new Assistive Technology (AT) Lab that's an important bridge for helping individuals with disabilities achieve a greater level of independence.



From left are Boca Raton City Councilman Anthony Majhess, Lesser, Lesser, Landy & Smith PLLC Managing Partner Gary Lesser, Boca Raton Mayor Susan Wheelchel, Miss Boca Raton, Stand Among Friends Founder & President Shawn Friedkin; Greater Boca Raton Chamber of Commerce President & CEO Troy McLellan and Palm Beach County Commissioner Steven Abrams.

A special grand opening ribbon cutting and tour for civic, community, business and medical leaders were held at the lab that's now readily accessible to those with disabilities. It offers technology and related training that helps the disabled continue to provide for themselves with dignity and hope.

Recognizing the vital mission and services

offered by SAF, Gary Lesser, the managing partner of Lesser, Lesser, Landy & Smith, PLLC, which has served injured clients and their families in Palm Beach County since 1927, hosted the grand opening and ribbon-cutting reception. In so doing, the firm intends to begin generating increased awareness in the greater South Florida community and among employers about the important programs and accomplishments of SAF and to encourage their engagement as effective advocates, promoters and funders for SAF in further support of the people helped and trained to better succeed in the community.

"By helping people with disabilities become independent by assisting them to train for, find and maintain employment, they earn a salary that allows them to leave government subsidized programs like welfare and other disability support programs," noted SAF Founder and President Shawn Friedkin.

Founded in 1997, Stand Among Friends is a 501(c) 3 nonprofit established to help all people with disabilities. Its mission is to promote opportunities for people with disabilities to live a life without limits and experience the highest degree of independence and success in their communities.

With the new AT Lab led by trained instructors and supported by business and community public/private partnership investment, Friedkin figures that participants in the SAF employment program should generate more than \$16 million in the first two years in combined salary and benefits.

Friedkin noted that since 2008 (prior to the establishment of the AT Lab) SAF successfully placed more than 180 individuals with disabilities in employment at such businesses as City Furniture, Comcast, Nordstrom, The Breakers Hotel, Circuit City, Publix, Berlitz International Language School, Call 4 Health, government agencies and more as a result of the organization's innovative and consistent use of training and technology to support its clients.

The AT Lab, located at the SAF Disability Center in the Christine E. Lynn School of Nursing building on the Florida Atlantic University campus in Boca Raton, was created to advance and expand SAF services to students, graduates, and adults with disabilities in South Florida. SAF spent more than a year developing, designing, building and training/certifying staff for the new AT Lab.

"We find that most of our clients who have sustained serious injuries and disabilities as a result of accidents are in dire need of much more than just the warranted financial outcomes they deserve," noted attorney Gary Lesser, managing partner of Lesser, Lesser, Landy & Smith, whose law firm is leading the public/private partnership and funding initiative themed "It Feels Good To Stand Among Friends."

"They need vital, empowering and relevant programs such as those provided by Stand Among Friends that provide people with disabilities the tools, motivation, technologies, instruction and business and community relationships that assist them to 'live a life without limits', and as independent as possible. Our outreach and funding efforts are designed to encourage community and businesses to engage in, support, utilize and promote this critical South Florida resource."

According to Friedkin, currently one in five residents (ages 5-65+) in Palm Beach County has a disability and a staggering 38 percent of them are unemployed, and one in five residents (ages 5-65+) in Broward County has a disability and 36 percent of them are unemployed.

"Our goal is to dramatically reduce the percentage of individuals with disabilities who are unemployed simply because they were not supported by the latest state-of-the-art AT equipment and training," noted Friedkin, who was injured in a car accident that left him paralyzed from the chest down. The accident left Shawn searching for many answers which were difficult to find and often unavailable. Frustrated with mounting questions and the lack of resources, he established SAF as a resource and guidance center for all people in similar situations.