

'Save the Connectors' receives support from Knights of Columbus

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Pictured are, from left, Gerry Safranski, Laura Kelly, Brian Kelly and Debbie Bain

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Community Connectors is a University of Delaware [Center for Disabilities Studies](#) (CDS) program that develops leadership skills in young adults with disabilities and provides them with social and recreational opportunities. When the Connectors lost their funding last summer, members and their parents began looking for new sources of funding to continue the program.

Fortunately, a group of Knights came to the rescue, as the Knights of Columbus Coffee Run Council 6768 presented the group with a check for \$560 in response to efforts to "Save the Connectors." While the donation does not meet all of the funding needs, the organization's generosity buys time for the group to continue functioning while they seek additional support.

When Gerry Safranski, a member of the Catholic men's organization, met with representatives of Community Connectors at CDS on Jan. 20, he was surprised to learn about their many community service projects. "It sounds like you're the Knights of Columbus," he told Laura Kelly, after she explained why Connectors is important to her.

"You can put your best foot forward on leadership," explained Kelly, who has taken a leadership role by planning and implementing an outing for the Connectors to see her perform in a play and is now in the process of planning a dinner party

with another member. She enjoys the group's community service projects because she likes "helping the poor or doing a fundraiser."

Past community service projects that were planned and carried out by Connectors include cooking breakfast at Ronald McDonald House and collecting food for the Delaware Does More food drive.

Bob Spengler, a Knights of Columbus member and father of Connectors member Robert Spengler, knew that proceeds of the Coffee Run Council's annual Tootsie Roll drive are used to

support persons with intellectual disabilities. Therefore, he recommended that Community Connectors receive a grant from the 2009 Tootsie Roll drive, and his recommendation was approved.

To support these young adults' full participation in their communities, Community Connectors uses a person-centered approach that involves goal setting, individualized coaching, volunteerism and community service experiences, recreational events, and personalized training sessions. Life coaches provide instruction, encouragement, information, and guidance within a framework that focuses on the individual's hopes, dreams, and goals.

Laura Kelly's father, Brian, is pleased that Connectors encourages assertiveness and independence in its members. He noted that Laura has participated in many activities during her life, often with family involvement, but he pointed out that "there's a time when young adults have to get involved in activities on their own. Community Connectors allows for meeting new friends and seeing old friends and for young adults to take on leadership roles and become independent."

The Connectors have used their leadership skills to organize a fundraiser on Tuesday, March 16, from 5 to 9 p.m., at Friendly's Restaurant, 1115 South College Ave., Newark. Friendly's will donate 10 percent of proceeds from eat-in and take-out meals and gift certificates to the Connectors. This is an opportunity for the community to help "Save the Connectors" while enjoying an evening out or an easy meal at home.

Another fundraising effort to sustain the basic operational costs of the program is being led by Elaine Siebold, a University of Delaware alumna and mother of Connectors member Maura Siebold. She is exploring opportunities for collaborating with campus Greek organizations.

"Because the Center for Disabilities Studies is self-supporting, we need to partner with others to secure resources for the work that we are committed to doing," commented CDS Director Beth Mineo. "We are thrilled that individuals and their families value this program to the extent that they are willing to help keep it vital. And we are grateful to those who are investing their efforts in helping us to secure funding."

If you would like to learn more about Community Connectors and how you can help "Save the Connectors," please contact Debbie Bain, who coordinates the Community Connectors program, at (302) 831-8733 or [dbain@udel.edu].

The Center for Disabilities Studies supports the well-being, inclusion, and empowerment of people with disabilities and their families. Its mission is to enhance the lives of individuals and families in Delaware through education, prevention, service, and research related to disabilities. The Center promotes independence and productivity so individuals and families can fully participate in the life of the community.

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