Meeting Notes – Oct. 22, 2024

The LaFayette Rotary Club held its weekly meeting on Tuesday, October 22, 2024. Rotarian Stanley Tucker was responsible for the program. He invited Craig Brown, executive director of Valley Haven School, to be our speaker. Craig has spent the last 28 years at Valley Haven, more than half of his life. Valley Haven School, located in Valley, AL, serves infants and toddlers from birth to age 3 who have a developmental delay or who have a specific diagnosis, such as Cerebral Palsy, Downs Syndrome, Spina Bifida or other disabilities. These students are served in their homes. They also serve adults who have cognitive, intellectual, or developmental disabilities at Valley Haven School.

Craig began by telling us his life story. He began his college career at Southern Union State Community College (SUSCC). he first considered majoring in business but hated math. He took a year off and worked at Russell Mill. He returned to SUSCC and completed his degree while continuing to work. He then enrolled at Troy where he took some psychology and sociology courses and loved them. He completed an internship with East Alabama Mental Health (EAMH), working with individuals with mental health and substance abuse issues. Upon graduation he was hired by EAMH and worked from 4 PM to 8 AM. He earned less there than he did at Russell Mill. As a 23-year-old, on Sunday nights he led a group therapy session for adults older than him. On one particular night his knowledge and life experience were challenged by a woman and he almost quit. He worked at EAMH for a year. During that time, he married his wife, a special education teacher.

His next job was as a job coach in Anniston. He served several counties, locating employment opportunities for students and helping them secure jobs. While looking for jobs for his students, he saw an opening for a position at Valley Haven and applied. He was hired there in 1997 as a Qualified Mental Retardation Professional. The position is now known as a Qualified Developmental Disability Professional. In 2005 Tony Edmondson, the executive director of Valley Haven School, retired and Carig was chosen to succeed him.

Craig spoke on the impact that COVID had on the school. On March 13, 2020, the decision was made to temporarily close Valley Haven School, thinking it would be for just a few days. They reopened six months later, with only 23 students. They served the 23 students until January 2021, when the numbers dropped to 13. Eleven of their students had passed away from COVID or COVID-related illnesses. Because their funding is tied to their enrollment, it was a very difficult time financially. Thanks to the Valley Haven Foundation supplementing the school, they were able to stay afloat financially.

Valley Haven now serves 54 adults and 27+ infants and toddlers. Staff has been lost through attrition, but Early Intervention (EI) services, those services provided to infants and toddlers, have never suffered. EI services are more costly to provide, due to the need for speech and language pathologists, physical therapists, and occupational therapists.

The Hike Bike Run event is the annual fundraiser. This provides matching funds for federal dollars. The year 2024 was the first year ever not to raise more than $100,000. Although $105,000.00 was pledged, only $97,000.00 was collected. The collection rate, 92%, was higher than the usual 80+/-%.

Craig mentioned that the standards for providing services have changed over the years. He also pointed out that a person cannot simply call Valley Haven to enroll a family member. All applications go through a service coordinator at an 800 number. Availability is based on criticality. Valley Haven currently has a waiting list.

Diane Sherriff