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## From corporate law to advocating for the disabled, Jeff Bernick's big transition

Janet Perez | Managing Editor Dec 5, 2018



Jeff Bernick, right, shares a warm moment with Shelly Lee, who participates in TCH's day program and lives in one of its group homes.

Photo courtesy of TCH

After spending nearly 30 years as a lawyer, Jeff Bernick found the right time and the right opportunity to change careers and redirect his passion to a cause he truly loves — supporting the state's disabled population.

In October, Bernick left his job as managing partner at Jackson Lewis to become CEO of The Centers for Habilitation (TCH), which provides a wide variety of services that support, care for and empower adults with developmental and physical disabilities. Before that, he had been on TCH's board of directors for seven years.

"I was at a place where I could have practiced law for another 10 years and made another pile of money, but when I looked back on my life, was that really what I wanted to be able to say about how I spent my time here? So that was what motivated me," Bernick said.

Bernick, who is a member of Temple Solel, fully intends to follow his predecessors' longevity at the helm of TCH. Since the organization was founded 51 years ago, it has only had four CEOs, including Bernick.

His love affair with TCH began in 2010, when he was taken on a tour of the organization's facility in Tempe.

"I absolutely fell in love with TCH and its mission, especially the social enterprise piece of it," he said. "I always wanted to do something like this, but amazingly, to do it at a place like TCH, is really more than I could have hoped for."

Bernick credits his parents and his faith with putting him on a path to help the community, especially the most vulnerable in our society.

"I think they set an example for me that, either consciously or subconsciously, was a real foundation for me to have experiences where I did something for someone else," he said. "I found that made me feel better than saving IBM money on a lawsuit."

Lest anyone think Bernick has downsized his career, he actually has moved to an organization with 600 employees and manages a \$21 million annual budget. And like other nonprofits that rely on state money, Bernick knows he has to battle for every cent of care reimbursement TCH can get.

TCH's variety of programs also keep Bernick busy.

The organization's services include operating 16 group homes — 13 in the Valley and three in Tucson — that house 60 people; supporting more than 100 people living in their own homes; and helping about 200 individuals get jobs or job training.

TCH works with private employers who hire the organization's higher-functioning adults. He described talking to one young a young woman whose job is to roll silverware in napkins for Dave and Buster's.

"She was so proud," Bernick said. "I've met people that are sitting on the Arizona Supreme Court or running huge \$100 million businesses that aren't as proud of what they do as this young lady. We're supposed to be lifting up this population of people that we support, but in a lot of ways, they definitely lift us, too."

TCH employs disabled adults itself through its division ASDD Document Destruction. Operating since 1967, ASDD has about 3,000 customers.

But perhaps TCH's most important offering is the peace of mind it can provide to older parents with disabled adult children. The disabled are now living longer and are increasingly likely to outlive their parents. For Pat Little-Upah, TCH was life-transforming.

Little-Upah said that 10 years ago, her now 44-year-old daughter, Lisa, who has Down syndrome, was in a day program that was not meeting her needs. After talking to mothers of other disabled adults, Little-Upah decided to transfer Lisa to a TCH program.

"Change is extremely difficult for Lisa, but TCH has worked to provide her a stable environment. TCH has provided Lisa with the social and coping skills to be able to better manage her behaviors, which has allowed her to do many community and social activities she could not have done otherwise," Little-Upah said. "An older parent's greatest fear is that when we are not around who will advocate for our child? At TCH, even if I am not involved, I know that she will be loved and given the best possible care." **JN**

For more information on The Centers for Habilitation, visit [tch-az.com](http://tch-az.com).