



PHOTO BY THOMAS WASPER

Ambassador: Cynthia Sewell, former chief executive of New Horizons, at the nonprofit's facility in North Hills. She started working at the organization in 1988.

Special Needs CEO

Cynthia Sewell, long-time leader at New Horizons for the developmentally disabled, retired last month.

By HELEN FLOERSH Staff Reporter

For the past 40 years, Cynthia Sewell has dedicated her career to improving the quality of life for those with intellectual disabilities. As a young adult, she was named the inaugural program director of *Therapeutic Living Centers for the Blind*, where she oversaw the development of the San Fernando Valley's first residential facility for individuals with special needs. Later she established the first behavioral day program for the *Tierra del Sol Foundation* and worked with *Social Vocational Services Inc.* to help developmentally disabled people secure stable employment. Today, Sewell is best known for her contributions to *New Horizons*, a North Hills nonprofit that provides services and support to individuals with special needs. She joined the organization in 1988 as residential director, and was promoted to executive director four years later. She was promoted again in 2009 to chief executive, and until her retirement in December oversaw more than 400 staff members, 1,600 developmentally disabled adults and an annual budget of \$16 million. She will remain with the organization for another year as executive consultant. Sewell sat down with the *San Fernando Valley Business Journal* to discuss changing public perceptions of disabilities, memories of the cookie business and her proudest moments of service.

Question: How did you start out in this field?

Answer: Forty years ago, when I was a student at Cal State L.A., I read in the school newspaper about a job opening for a care provider at an organization for people with special needs. I got the position, then was promoted to develop in the San Fernando Valley the first six-bed group home for people with behavioral problems and vision impairments who were exiting state hospitals. I was lucky to start off doing direct service then to suddenly be the program director of this new facility in the San Fernando Valley.

What was it like to be in the field at that time?

Back in the 1970s and early 1980s, many people were still in large institutions. A new law mandated that children with special needs receive elementary and high school education, but there wasn't much out there for adults. Then out of the late 1970s came the development of programmed services, and in the 1980s began the whole community movement.

Was your motivation to work with individuals with developmental disabilities prompted by personal experience?

No. In fact, before my first job, I thought I was going to become a counselor. I have a

Cynthia Sewell

TITLE: Former chief executive officer

COMPANY: New Horizons: Serving Individuals with Special Needs

BORN: Van Nuys

EDUCATION: Bachelor of arts in French and psychology, California State University – Los Angeles; master's degree in psychology, Cal State – Los Angeles; licensed marriage and family therapist

CAREER TURNING POINT: Being promoted to serve as executive director at New Horizons in 1994.

PERSONAL: Lives in Monterey Park but has worked in the San Fernando Valley throughout her career; married to her sixth-grade boyfriend.

HOBBIES: Rock climbing, hiking, biking, attending music concerts (all types), spending time with her six cats and dogs, relaxing with her husband.

master's in psychology and a marriage-family therapist license. But from the day I walked through the doors of the *Therapeutic Living Centers for the Blind*, I was smitten. It's so rewarding.

What makes your job gratifying?

Whatever we give to the people we work with, they give back to us many-fold. Our clients at New Horizons really care whether we're here or not. They'll ask things like, "Where were you last week? How was your weekend? How's your husband?" Being in this field puts everything in perspective, and it has really been a privilege to be at New Horizons.

How has awareness of this population changed during your career?

Back 40 years ago, I didn't see any people with intellectual or developmental disabilities mixed in with the more "typical" population. Now, just through New Horizons, more than 300 individuals (with special needs) are working in the community. They're visible – people know that they can add value as good neighbors, as volunteers, as workers.

What work still needs to be done?

We still need to get out and educate the community even more about how this population can add value. The word is "inclusion" – that's an important new buzzword in our field, and in this context it's the mandate that those with intellectual and developmental disabilities must be afforded the opportunity to be included in community life and work. We're lucky to have so many businesses here in the San Fer-

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