

New Look for Mercer DD



Building's exterior is getting its first major overhaul.

Mercer DD has a reputation for making the best of what it's got. And that's a good thing. But at the same time, people with disabilities and their families deserve a safe and comfortable place to come when meeting with staff or gathering for an event.

So Mercer DD took on its first major exterior rehabilitation project on its Mud Pike facility west of Celina this year. One major aspect was the removal of the mounds of earth that were part of the building's original design. Meant to conserve energy, they presented problems of their own, said Mercer DD Superintendent Shawn Thieman.

"They tended to trap water against the building," he said. "They also attracted colonies of bugs and spiders."

Crews from Baumer Construction, Minster, Ohio, began work two months ago. They hauled the mounds of earth away and also removed the existing entrance, meant to protect visitors and staff from the sometimes-brutal Ohio weather. It served its purpose, Thieman said, but it was time for an update. Designed by Fanning and Howey of Celina, the new entrance will provide both shelter and style.

"Everybody's been great to work with," Thieman said. "Everything is coming in under budget." COVID-19 delays that have plagued some other construction projects have not hampered this one. Baumer Construction is able to fabricate its own steel so did not have to contend with delays in

getting materials, Thieman said.

The project is not only under budget—it is ahead of schedule, he added. "Work should progress quickly from here on out," he said. The total cost of the project is anticipated to be less than \$450,000.

Thieman expressed gratitude to those who originally built what once was Cheryl Ann School. "There were people who worked very hard so that people with disabilities could have a facility that met their needs," he said. "What we are doing is built on their shoulders."



A new entrance will greet visitors at Mercer DD's Mud Pike facility west of Celina.

Even in Terrible 2020, Families Find a Way

Optometrists say that 20/20 vision is considered perfect eyesight. Sadly, the calendar this year paints a much different picture—2020 has been the furthest thing from perfect. We have seen the world change in ways that we never could have envisioned or predicted. Mercer DD's system of serving individuals with disabilities seemed to have great momentum in recent years; people with disabilities were becoming increasingly involved in their communities, living more independently, and reaching important personal goals.

Unfortunately, there have been some disruptions this year that have been difficult. For years, day services were offered Monday through Friday to any adult who wanted it. Employment was readily attainable for those who were prepared for it, and transportation was easily provided. However, this year, group restrictions and social distancing requirements have prevented day



**Cheryl Ann
Superintendent
Shawn Thieman**

provider sites from opening at their maximum capacity. We still have some individuals who are staying at home and desperately wishing to return to their normal jobs ... and I know that

there must be families that are just as desperate to return to normal life.

I spoke with the SSAs recently about the individuals that they serve. I expressed a concern for the lack of day service options and what this must be doing to the families that have needed to pick up the slack. I was certain that they must be dealing with many disgruntled people. Surprisingly, they said that families were not complaining. To the contrary, the SSAs reported that families have adjusted and adapted to the struggles of 2020 and have accepted these changes in unbelievable ways.

At first, I had a hard time understanding why we didn't have more overwhelmed families, but it has recently become very clear to me. Families that care for loved ones with disabilities are resilient. They have dealt with adversity and injustices in their lives that typical families have never dealt with. Dreams probably have changed over time and families have learned that things may not go along the expected path.

This might be one more way that the world of disabilities can bring unexpected blessings. Thank you to our families—we learn so much from you.

Our Gym Also Sports a New Look!



Work was also going on inside our facility on Mud Pike. In a separate project, the gym received a new coat of paint, new flooring and blinds. We worked on the acoustics and visuals, adding a soundboard and a big screen.

Most of the work was done inhouse by Jay Schwieterman, Maintenance Coordinator.

The like-new space is already being put to good use by individuals like Josh, left, and small groups (limited by current local health directives). Activities in the gym include basketball, pickleball, volleyball and anything else our folks can dream up.

Are you are interested in learning more about/ becoming an independent provider of services to people with disabilities? Please contact Mercer DD at 489-586-2369, x214.

Mercer DD is Stepping Up Its Game

We have recently accepted the responsibility of overseeing Special Olympics for Mercer County. We are developing two basketball teams and are hoping to recruit local school teams to scrimmage due to the lack of regional teams that will travel for games. Stay tuned!

Pandemic Can't Stop Parents, EI Staff

When you're lost in a woods without a roadmap and only a very blurry compass, one of the things you worry about is how to keep everybody together, keep moving in the right direction. It takes a lot of coordinating and calling back and forth, "Are you okay? Still with us?"

In a sense, that's how it was at the start of the coronavirus pandemic for Mercer County DD's Early Intervention program. "We tried to plan ahead, but COVID was always nine steps ahead of us," said Melissa Kaup, EI Manager.

The staff was used to sticking close by the side of families and young children (from birth up to age 3) who need help in reaching developmental milestones. Suddenly, with a dangerous virus on the loose, "close by" was temporarily impossible. The EI staff had to find a way to meet virtually with families that normally received home visits from EI staffers.

To propose changes to parents felt risky—but it had to be done. "We were worried about how the whole situation would affect the program. Would we lose people? Would people drop out? But our numbers did not drop off. Did they all like it? Probably not, especially at first. But they stuck with us." The caseload throughout 2020 has stayed steady at around 100 families.

The staff had a short time to plan and prepare before launching its virtual efforts. "It was strange for all of us at first,"

said Laura Yoder, Speech-Language Pathologist. "Often, we'd go into homes and model play techniques for them (meant to help with their child's develop-

ment). Instead, we had to walk them through it over the phone or in a Zoom meeting."

Some families were resistant to Zoom. They may not have adequate wifi to support the app. They might have worried that a 30-minute Zoom meeting would be too long for their young children. "Or they may have a really busy household with lots of other kids and pets. They might have thought, 'I just can't do that,'" said Kathy Coon, EI Scheduler.

In reality, "for some families, it really empowered them," said Mindy Muhlenkamp, Occupational Therapist. "They listen then follow through with what we suggest. They think about creative ways to include what we recommend into their routine."

The EI staff was amazed and delighted at the videos that families started sending to them. "We've gotten a lot more interaction with the families between visits," said Molly Dillon, EI Service Coordinator. "They send us videos showing their child's progress. It's nice to get



that from the parents – it would be great if that continues" after the pandemic.

Dannielle Kelly, who works with EI through the Ohio Department of Health's Help Me Grow Home Visiting program, had to rethink her home visits to socially and economically disadvantaged families. She wasn't sure they were going to adjust to virtual meetings. "It can be hard to keep them engaged in the program. Some have a tendency to feel thrown-away because they've had so many people let them down," she said. "But when I offered them the option of phone calls, video visits or text. They said, 'Text? Yes!' Many of them are young and they love to text."

Mercer DD Superintendent Shawn Thieman praised the entire Mercer DD staff for its flexibility and creativity. "Our staff has done extremely well through all the uncertainty," he said. "Many of our staff commented they never worked harder than when they had to figure out a way to provide services virtually. But they figured it out."



FALL FUN



Top left, Angie and Mackenzie show off their buckeye necklaces at a craft night on October 20. Lower left, Angie checks out her gift bag at a halloween party.

At right, Mercer DD's unified golf team and the local golfers who partnered with them. This was the team's first season. Fifteen individuals partnered with local golfers to learn the game and then competed at the Celina Lynx course.



Want to learn more about Mercer DD events and activities? Contact Sam Fledderjohann at sfledderjohann@mercerdd.org

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