



Amarillo's Advocates

Nonprofit Advo Companies has a decades-long history of providing residential living, job training and day habilitation for the intellectually disabled.

written by becca nelson sankey | photos by adair photography

It was an economics class at Southwest Texas State University

in San Marcos that changed the trajectory of Carla Hughes' career and, ultimately, the lives of hundreds of individuals in Amarillo with intellectual disabilities. "Our professor had a daughter who had special needs, and he asked us to volunteer at a Special Olympics track meet for extra credit, and I volunteered," said Hughes, the president and CEO of Advo Companies Inc., which provides residential living, vocational training and day habilitation services for individuals with intellectual disabilities. "I was a business major at the time, and I fell in love. I worked the track meet on Saturday and went to school on Monday to change my major to be a social worker."

Hughes' first professional career working with the intellectually disabled was at the Fort Worth State School. After eight years there, the state legislature mandated that state schools begin closing, and Fort Worth's was the first to go. "My mom was a nurse and we came to Amarillo to open the business," Hughes said of Advo Companies. "When I was at the state school, we were placing people in group homes, so it just seemed like that was the best place for them to live. If they couldn't live at home, (and there's a lot of reasons why they can't) they needed a home to live in. I felt like we could do really great homes, and that's what it was all about. Everything we do, from the time they get up until they go to bed, should be a living experience."



Sean Perry, Carla Hughes & Tafe Prescott

▪ residential living

▪ vocational training

▪ habilitation services





Jessica Sanchez & Carla Hughes

Advo Companies, a non-profit private provider of specified programming for individuals with intellectual disabilities, is certified and licensed by the Texas Department of Health and Human Services. It differs from the more familiar Texas Panhandle Centers which is the local authority providing a broader range of services. "For instance, we provide a specifically designated service called **Intermediate Care for Intellectually Developmentally Disabled (ICF/IDD)**," Hughes said. "That is a federally funded program that provides residential services, and that residential component is a per diem; we are required to provide everything that individual needs, anything that Medicaid does not cover."

"The other program we provide is Home and Community Based Services (HCS). That program is a state and federally funded program and provides a whole host of services. Parents or guardians of an individual with an intellectual disability can choose a group home, choose to be a host home and provide the service for them (or designate another person to do that), or choose in home/own home so the individual can live in a house behind their parent. You pick and choose the services you need."



"Everything we do from the time they get up until they go to bed should be a learning experience."

-Carla Hughes



Mark Schuster

Hailey Roane at the Workshop folding towels for Cintas



Tonya Duck at the Workshop doing a contract job with UniFirst Hangers.

Advo Companies also operates a day habilitation program Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. that provides its lowest-functioning individuals with higher needs a structured educational or vocational day. "The day habilitation program is designed to provide them daily living skills, toileting skills, feeding skills, range of motion and educational opportunities so they can retain the skills they have. In this area they function from 6 months old to about 2 years old. We do a lot of things to keep them stimulated and engaged in their environment."

Advo Companies also provides a vocational and pre-vocational training program for individuals whose functioning age is 2 to 12 years. "We contract with businesses in our community to bring work to our workshop, and we are licensed by the Department of Labor," Hughes said. "We do things like manufacturing, assembly, packaging, paper shredding and T-shirt screen printing. We coil copper tubing, cut pipe, assemble manifolds, and cut aluminum tubing. We work for Amarillo Gear, Nothing but Neck, Cintas Uniforms, Unifirst, H&H Printwear, and Welcome Pardner. Then we do job placement. We have consumers placed at T.J. Maxx, United, The Craig, Hughes Cleaning Equipment, Sam's Club, Maxwell's Pumpkin Farm, Walmart, Sod Poodle's and Coolhorse. With each job placement, we do job coaching to make sure they're successful at their job."



The individuals at Advo Companies have an innate desire to be successful, Hughes said. "They understand when we don't have work at the workshop and they're sitting there coloring. They don't want to do that," she said. "They want to do meaningful work. You should see them on pay day when they bring me their check. It means something. They want to be productive members of their community."

It's difficult for Hughes to narrow down the number of Advo Companies' success stories to just a couple, but Elizabeth Campbell and her boyfriend Tommy Jerman are two that immediately come to mind. Elizabeth, now in her late 20s, was raised by her grandmother, who placed her in the care of Advo Companies before she passed away in 2009. Elizabeth started college, got a job on campus and blossomed. "She graduated, came back, got a job at H&H Printwear and was extremely successful," Hughes said. "She became a global messenger for Special Olympics and speaks to civic organizations and government organizations. She's traveled to Washington, D.C., and has spoken before Congress. Right now, she's in the Dominican Republic playing in the Special Olympics World Invitational Tennis Tournament."



Elizabeth Campbell




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 -Carla Hughes

Elizabeth Campbell and Tate Prescott in the Lunch Room



Tommy Jerman came to live with Advo Companies in 1996 after growing up in High Plains Children's Home. He had been living in an apartment in Canyon but "it just wasn't the right fit for him," Hughes said. A former classmate's family, Bobby and Carol Cooper, contacted Advo Companies on Tommy's behalf. "We placed him in one of our ICF/IDD group homes," she said. "We were able to get him a job at Hughes Cleaning Equipment. He learned to drive a forklift, mix chemicals, build trailers and mount equipment on the trailers. His employer says he doesn't know what he would do without Tommy." Tommy lived in Advo Companies' group home for several years until the Coopers became his legal guardians and he moved in with their other son. "He is extremely successful living on his own," Hughes said.



Daniel Nix & Carla Hughes, Day Program



Blake Bagwell and Carla Hughes



"At the end of the day I know that we made a difference, that that day meant something to someone."

-Carla Hughes



Tonya Duck at Nursing Services



Jonah Guillen, Day Program



Russell McLeland at the Workshop doing a contract job for Welcome Partner



Tate Prescott at the Workshop doing a paper shredding contract job



"Every single person has purpose and meaning."

-Carla Hughes

For Hughes, it's stories like Elizabeth's and Tommy's that make her work so worthwhile. "At the end of the day I know that we made a difference, that that day meant something to someone," she said. "I know that sounds hokey, but there are so many days in their lives when nobody really cared if they sat in the corner all day long and didn't do one dang thing. We make sure that every single day that's not happening. Every single person has purpose and meaning."

Without Advo Companies, "I don't know where our community would be," Hughes added. "I know where the individuals would be that we serve, and they would not be as happy, and they wouldn't be the family they are today without us. We're the Advo family. "I thank God for putting the dedicated staff with me that make this a success. There's not one person that can do what we've done at Advo. There are hundreds of staff that work at Advo that make this the place that it is."



Friends Miranda Estes, Elizabeth Campbell & Tanya Duck

Advo Companies is a 501(c)3 nonprofit that serves individuals ages 16 and up. To donate or to see if an individual qualifies for any of their services, go to the company's website, www.advocompanies.org. Individuals interested in services also may visit their local MHMR authority and have their service coordinator contact Advo Companies. Individuals do not need to be from Amarillo to qualify. †