

Buckeye Industries client celebrates 100th birthday

by DORIS COOK

MADISON - Buckeye Industries on Hubbard Road is a bustling place for special needs clients of New Avenues to Independence, Inc. Lots of attention is given one special needs client, Joe Direnfeld, who will turn 100 on Sept. 14.

His physical appearance belies his age of nearly a century. NAI's Perry Group Home has been Direnfeld's residence since 1964, said Karen Knavel, community relations director for the agency.

"Joe was born in McKeesport, Pennsylvania. His parents were immigrants from Germany and Hungary. He was a normal child attending school until the third grade," Knavel said.

A search of his family history and medical background shows that after witnessing the death of a friend, who fell from a second story porch, Direnfeld's life changed dramatically.

Knavel said that after the accident, his parents kept him at home determined to help him through the traumatic experience.

"He worked as a newspaper carrier and a ticket taker at the movies. When his parents died in the early 1960s they were living here in Ohio," Knavel continued.

She said Direnfeld ended up being admitted to the Mt. Vernon State Hospital in Ohio. It was a mental hospital.

"Joe did not need to be in such an institution. In 1964 he was moved to Perry Ridge Nursing Home. By the 1970s Ohio and other states stopped warehousing persons with developmental and mental illnesses," Knavel said.

In 1997 New Avenues to Independence purchased the Perry Group Home, where Direnfeld continues to live today with seven other residents. NAI is a private, non-profit organization serving children and adults with disabilities since 1952.

It was formerly known as Parents Volunteer Association, PVA Circle of Homes dedicated to providing people with disabilities and special needs to lead more independent lives.

The name change was made in 2000 as the organization expanded services to clientele in Cuyahoga, Lake and Ashtabula counties.

Services include group living homes, supported living, senior and vocation services, transitional respite, mainstream housing and children's program, Knavel said.

Supported living services are done at 40 sites in the three-county area. The agency also does a summer program

at Broadmoor in Lake County.

"Here at Buckeye Industries in Madison, Joe and other clients come every day to the sheltered workshop program. We partner with area employers to do everything from labeling bottles to shredding documents. We have art therapy one day a week and Joe even paints," Knavel said.

One of Direnfeld's abstract art creations hangs in the office lobby area at Buckeye Industries. A large hand painted collage was also created by all the clients.

Conversing with Direnfeld about celebrating his 100 years is helped along with Rae Kennison, one of his habilitation aides. His speech is halting, but understandable.

"We give him simple jobs to do like stuffing envelopes. He always smiles and has great interest in the Cleveland Indians ball team," Kennison said. "He barely misses a day coming here in our van unless he's ill. He's an inspiration to the other clients."

Knavel said the art therapy classes are taught by Jennifer Lesiev of Cleveland. She does similar art classes for all the NAI homes and at other program outlets.

NAI officials are looking to do more subcontract production work partnering with area businesses. Larger paper shredding equipment is one



PHOTO BY DORIS COOK

Celebrating his 100th birthday soon is Joe Direnfeld, a special needs client with New Avenues to Independence Inc. Direnfeld works daily at Buckeye Industries in Madison with his rehabilitation aide, Rae Kennison. Presently 12 clients are employed at the Buckeye Industries locations.

item the organization needs, Knavel said.

Janitorial services is another work opportunity for NAI clients to do.

They are professionally supervised at these type jobs, Knavel said.

Warehouse space at Buck-

eye Industries building is ample for any expansion of contracts the agency receives. Tables are set up for the clients to work at and comfortable chairs are nearby when they want to take a rest or eat their lunches.

For more information on

NAI and how to partner or learn more about volunteer opportunities call the Madison location at 866-339-5744 or stop in at 402 North Lake St. (Route 528). The Cleveland location office at 17608 Euclid Ave. can be reached by calling (216) 481-1907.