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ADVANCE PHOTO ■ MIKE FALCO

A Very Special Place league manager Mike Endress, furthest from the camera, poses with keglers, from the left, Ida Washington, Susan Gibbin, Pat Hutchins, Pepe Rodriguez, Willie Franco and Emma Mae Saunders.

Special league, special people

■ **Dedicated workers help A Very Special Place loop make a difference for developmentally disabled adults**

If you ever happened upon the A Very Special Place bowling loop Saturday mornings at Rab's Country Lanes, you would see the name is appropriate.

For all but two or three weeks of the year, 64 developmentally disabled adults take to the lanes for 2½ hours of fun under the guidance of Mike Endress, the loop's manager.

Executive director Genevieve Benoit and Deputy Executive Director Diane Buglioli are the founders of the Dongan Hills-based agency, which is celebrating its silver anniversary this year.

"Going back they didn't like what they saw (how the developmentally disabled were being treated)," explained Endress. "They knew of the need to bring these adults into the community, and I pretty much consider them pioneers."

Endress, too, has been a pioneer of sorts.

"Mike has been the first and only bowling manager we've had, so much of what has happened has been because of Mike's efforts," said Buglioli.

Maureen Brennick, the Associate Executive Director of the agency, who oversees all of the community support and senior services, says Endress has been a tremendous asset to the agency.



The 42-year-old Endress has been in charge of the league for 20 years now, and loves showing up for work every Saturday morning.

"I like it," said Endress, a Huguenot resident. "It gives me an opportunity to share something I like and as far as my career goes, it's important when you enjoy what you're doing."

Endress got his start in the field out of high school when he did an internship at Willowbrook State School, which later became known as the Staten Island Developmental School.

"One of my teachers in Port Richmond High School had left the profession and became a supervisor out there and I kind of had his guidance," explained Endress.

Today, Endress has continued his work with the developmentally disabled, teaching special education at PS 37 in Great Kills.

It's all part of the Huguenot resident's makeup, and he wouldn't probably trade his responsibilities for anything in the world.

Which brings us to his dedication to the A Very Special Place bowling league, a 16-team loop that has grown from its beginnings at Knotty Pine Lanes in Mariners Harbor.

"I guess around the 10-year stage it grew from an eight-team league to a 16-team league," said Endress. "The basic thing is they're having fun and enjoying themselves. The competition is there. We put out standings sheets."

"Bowling gives them something to do in their spare time just like you and me. It keeps their sanity, and interests and stimulates them. Some have tried it and it wasn't for them, and some have been here for the 20 years."

The league just recently concluded its winter schedule and has begun its summer session.

"We try to get new people," said Endress. "I like to give new people a chance to get involved."

The loop was once sanctioned — free of charge — by the Young American Bowling Alliance, but YABA later imposed a fee, prompting the loop to venture out on its own.

The loop is actually an extension of the non-profit organization, A Very Special Place, which serves the developmentally disabled on Staten Island.

"They do the Tele-Ride type of stuff to group homes and to the agency's community centers," says Endress.

The organization also provides transportation for the bowlers to and from Country every Saturday. And the bowlers' participation in the loop is paid for by the organization's sponsors and membership fees.



JOE D'AMODIO SPARE TIME

of those.

"Bowling is therapeutic because it teaches skills and helps with their motor coordination," explained Brennick. "It also helps them socialize with others. They are learning to go to the snack bar and order things and purchase things. It teaches them about other things, not just bowling, although they love it."

Truth is, A Very Special Place's main goal is to see that these developmentally disabled people get into life's mainstream, relates Endress, and into programs that anyone else would sign up for.

And it seems to be working on the bowling lanes, where Endress says three of his teams have been included in a summer league at Country Lanes in the past, and "it has worked out well."

Endress also talks of the special relationship his league has had with the management at Country.

"They have made us so welcome over the years," said Endress. "Recently, (Country proprietor) Rab Wilkinson's club (the Staten Island Rotary Club) made a significant donation to A Very Special Place, which enabled us to get bowling shirts for each of the members this year."

"Also, (Country manager) Naz Laursen has played a great role in overseeing us and keeping us organized. And Ray Laursen (the Country house pro) always makes himself available to the bowlers and he himself has made donations over the years by giving us bowling equipment and trophies."

If anything, Endress would like to see programs like the A Very Special Place bowling league geared for children.

"It's more advantageous when you start at a younger age, and there isn't much around and I always tried to drop hints about it," he said. "As far as my experience within PS 37, (simulated) bowling is a popular activity during gym and also for class trips, so in that regard there has been some progress."

"Aside from being a person who has always worked with people with disabilities, he's also a fantastic bowler," said Brennick. "He knows how to teach the bowlers. He has a great relationship with them. He's not just a good teacher, but he knows how to teach them how to help themselves. They really grew to respect him and we're really happy to have him."

Brennick said the community services of the agency enlists people in therapeutic recreational activities, and bowling is one