

Cunneen devoted to helping children and families

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Two years ago, officials with The Bridge Youth & Family Services paused during their spring benefit to recognize a significant milestone: their longtime executive director, Peter Cunneen, had reached 20 years at the helm.

At the time, they credited him with broadening the agency's reach by involving hundreds of volunteers, while expanding its services across the age spectrum, from preschoolers through entire families.

On Wednesday, those same agency officials -- as well its volunteers, clients and many supporters -- had to come to terms with Mr. Cunneen's death. The former Chicago resident passed away Monday. He was 56.

"During Peter's tenure, The Bridge has grown in size and stature to become an invaluable community resource, touching lives of thousands of families in and around Palatine Township," said Gregg Stockey, interim executive director.

"Peter believed that to be effective, the organization needed to be as inclusive as possible," Stockey added.

"Consequently, he wanted to have as many people as possible involved with The Bridge as volunteers, so that they would think of it as their agency."

That growing sense of ownership transformed the agency, Stockey said, and remains Mr. Cunneen's legacy.

The Bridge started in 1965 within Palatine Township as a youth committee, before evolving into a teen drop-in center. By 1976, the agency formalized more of its counseling and crisis intervention services and took its name from the popular Simon and Garfunkel song "Bridge Over Troubled Waters."

Stockey estimates The Bridge now serves more than 2,000 people each year, between the hundreds of families who receive counseling there and the nearly 1,000 who receive more intensive counseling and crisis intervention.

Mr. Cunneen arrived 22 years ago after working at Little Brothers Friends of the Elderly in Chicago.

"We were impressed with his vision for The Bridge and how we could expand our services to meet the needs," said Kris Howard, a former board director and member of the search committee. "And we were impressed with his sincere commitment to wanting to help young people."

At the 2006 fundraiser, Cunneen reflected that in coming out to Palatine, he was returning to his strength in working in youth counseling.

"Helping kids has been most of my life," Cunneen said. "I'm an eclectic type of person. I don't do well when I have to do the same thing every day. I love the fact that here there's constant change, and something new every day."

Mr. Cunneen is survived by his wife, Darlene; son Sean Michael (Elizabeth) and granddaughter Evelyn Grace.

Visitation will take place from 2 to 9 p.m. today before an 11:30 a.m. funeral Saturday, both at Colonial-Wojciechowski Funeral Home, 6250 N. Milwaukee Ave. in Chicago.