

# Founder of Framingham nonprofit mental health agency steps down after 41 years



Executive director Iris Carroll founded Programs for People, an agency that helps adults recovering from mental illness, in 1974. (Daily News Staff Photo/Ken McGagh)

**By Danielle Ameden/Daily News Staff**  
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FRAMINGHAM – As the “product of a troubled mind,” Janine was hospitalized in the past for psychiatric reasons, but she credits a Framingham nonprofit with saving her life.

With the help of Programs for People, the 60-year-old Framingham woman has found ways to cope with her mental illness. She hasn’t been admitted to the hospital, she says proudly, since finding the agency’s group therapy and support services 10 years ago.

“It’s made me what I am today, which is a functioning, good, healthy, happy individual,” Janine said, describing the agency as a second home and an “active place for peace.” It’s stories like these that bring tears to the eyes of agency director Iris Carroll.

Striving to offer stigma-free mental health services in an environment that felt “more home-like” than institutional, Carroll founded Programs for People in 1974.

“We were very idealistic ‘60s people and we felt that this is the way people could have the best opportunity to heal and grow,” Carroll said.

Forty-one years later, Carroll is getting ready to step down as director and relocate to Minnesota, leaving a legacy that’s best told through the stories of members.

She said Janine’s description of the agency being a “place for peace” was beautiful. “It makes me cry,” Carroll said.

“The joy of making a difference in people’s lives is absolutely incredible rewarding,” she said.

Programs for People, initially started using a grant and state money, operates as a day hospital at 98 Lincoln St. in Framingham, from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., Monday through Friday. Its staff of 12 serves 175 clients a year from all over MetroWest, providing services ranging from therapy to employment, substance abuse and self-management skills to hospitalization prevention, music, crafts and current events classes.

“We’ve had people come and tell us that this program has saved their life,” Carroll said, sitting in a group therapy room in the agency’s attic on Wednesday afternoon with three clients and her two successors.

“It saved my life,” said Janine, who didn’t want to give her last name. “If it weren’t for this program, I wouldn’t be here now.”

At Programs for People, respect, honor and dignity and inclusion are guiding principles.

Carroll said a core belief is that a diagnosis of mental illness does not define a person.

One member, Sue, a 46-year-old Ashland woman who sat beside Janine, said Programs for People also changed her life.

Because of depression and anxiety, Sue used to not have the energy to get out of bed. She also struggled with substance abuse.

She said she went from having “zero social skills” and terrible social anxiety to now being an active member of the community.

“I started this program a totally different person,” she said. “I’ve totally done a 180.”

In addition to receiving services at Programs for People, Sue also now runs a group for fellow members to play trivia and board games.

“It’s a lot of fun,” she said. “When I started here I probably couldn’t even play a game, much less run a group. I’m now looking to go back to work, which I never thought I could do again.”

Carroll said it’s heartwarming to see her original vision reflected in the successes of the members, who are able to function in the community thanks to the agency’s services.

Keeping the agency going for four decades hasn’t been easy, Carroll said.

Now independent, Programs for People relies financially on donations and reimbursements from health insurance providers for services. And the community has been generous, giving money, advice and helping fix up the building.

Carroll said the saying “it takes a village” applies here.

“It really took a town and MetroWest to keep this program going,” she said.

Together, two staff members, Laura Hughes and Ethan Harris, are set to take over Carroll’s leadership role at the agency, Hughes as administrative director and Harris as the clinical director.

“It’s wonderful because I’ve worked with them both for a number of years,” Carroll said.

Harris, who has been involved with Programs for People from the beginning, said the agency will carry on Carroll’s mission.

He said Carroll has shown love and caring but also determination, consistency and grit.

Her model helps shine the light on “qualities in people they may not see in themselves,” Harris said.

“It’s a way of challenging people to bring out the best in them,” he said.

Programs for People will hold a farewell reception for Carroll on Tuesday, Sept. 22, from 8 to 10 a.m. at the Verve Hotel, 1360 Worcester St., Natick. It is open to the public.