

Excellence in Service

Bridgewell recognizes Vitali's commitment

BY PAUL HALLORAN

As Bridgewell heads into its next 50 years as a leading provider of comprehensive services for individuals with disabilities and other life challenges, it is fitting that it recognize someone who has played a key role in the organization for most of its existence.

Lynn attorney Samuel A. Vitali will be presented the Excellence in Service Award at Bridgewell's annual Imagine the Possibilities gala, to be held Nov. 6 at the Seaport Hotel in Boston. The award goes to someone who has shown great commitment to Bridgewell and exemplified its values.

Bridgewell opened in 1958 as the Child Guidance Center, providing consulting services to schools with students who had varying degrees of mental illness. Over time the agency shifted its focus to adults and became known as Greater Lynn Mental Health. In the early 1970s, when Massachusetts started deinstitutionalizing individuals with mental retardation, Greater Lynn Mental Health began to develop community-based housing.

Deinstitutionalization provoked serious opposition to group homes for the developmentally disabled. Vitali, serving on the board of the Greater Lynn Special Needs Housing Corporation, worked to change people's attitudes. Through

community meetings
and

educational outreach, he helped residents and political leaders gradually become more responsive, and succeeded in getting group homes sited in Lynn and other communities.

Over the last 30 years, Bridgewell – which took its current name in 2005 – has expanded its scope, both in the type of services it provides and its geographical reach. The agency offers more than 80 programs in 18 communities in Essex and Middlesex counties, providing residential care, day habilitation, housing, employment training and transportation for individuals with a wide range of developmental, psychiatric and physical disabilities.

As Bridgewell has expanded into communities outside Lynn, Vitali has often represented it before municipal boards as part of the permitting process. He has seen resistance decrease somewhat over the years, but educating the public on what Bridgewell does and why its role is so important remains critical.

"We identify people's concerns and address them," Vitali said. "Society has a more enlightened point of view now about who has the right to reside in communities, but we still do a lot of community intervention and outreach."

A lifelong Lynn resident and graduate of Lynn English, Boston College and Georgetown University Law School, Vitali has been practicing law since 1967.

He started

Imagine the Possibilities

Bridgewell's annual Imagine the Possibilities fundraising gala will be held Nov. 6 from 5:30-9:30 p.m. at the Seaport Hotel in Boston. The event includes a cocktail reception, silent and live auctions, dinner and program.

Two major awards will be presented: Lynn attorney Samuel A. Vitali will receive the Excellence in Service award, while Dr. Donald C. Goff will receive the Visionary Leadership award.

Tickets and sponsorships are available. For information, contact Carol McKean at 781-925-3459 or carol@carolmckeanevents.com.



Attorney Samuel Vitali visits with Bridgewell clients at the Boston Street facility.

his career working for the state legislature on a Ford Foundation Fellowship. His first experience in the area of mental health came when he worked as counsel to a special investigation of Foxboro State Hospital.

Bridgewell CEO Robert Stearns said Vitali has been an effective and valuable advocate for the agency. "Sam has been there for Bridgewell time and again over the last 35 years," he said. "He has provided us with his expertise, leadership and, most importantly, his passion for our mission. It would be hard to find a more deserving recipient of this award."

Also to be honored at the event is Dr. Donald C. Goff, who will receive the Visionary Leadership Award. He is the director of the schizophrenia program at Mass. General Hospital and a professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School. He is also medical director of the Freedom Trail Clinic at the Erich Lindemann Mental Health Center in Boston.

