



Barber National Institute

Making dreams come true.

History of the Barber National Institute



The multi-faceted organization that has become the Barber National Institute was founded by Erie educator Dr. Gertrude A. Barber in a single classroom in 1952. Dr. Barber, then an administrator in the Erie School District, recognized the need for children with disabilities to be educated in their hometown and not sent off to distant institutions. She worked with a small group of parents and teachers to begin a class at the local YMCA.

As word spread of Dr. Barber's work, classes began to grow, both in size and in the variety of programs that were opened at various temporary locations throughout Erie.

When the City of Erie closed the Lakeview Hospital, its communicable disease hospital located on Erie's bayfront, the building was leased to Dr. Barber for use as a school for children and a sheltered workshop for teaching vocational skills to adults. The first permanent site that would become the main campus of the Barber Center was opened on Sept. 1, 1958 with the goal of providing individual development for each exceptional child and adult.

After six years, students now at last had, as Dr. Barber described it, "the first place we could really call home."



The new facility earned state accreditation for its school programs on Nov. 30, 1962. The approved private school became renamed the Elizabeth Lee Black School in 2003, and now serves more than 240 children with autism, intellectual disabilities and multiple disabilities from throughout northwestern Pennsylvania and western New York with the latest technology and research-based teaching methods.

As services continued to grow, in 1968 construction began for a new complex that would eventually accommodate administrative offices, a medical suite, a cafeteria, and new classrooms for middle and high school students.

In 1969, the Barber Center opened facilities in Corry, Pennsylvania to offer educational and training programs to children and adults in southern Erie County.

In 1973, the Barber Center opened the first community group homes in Erie for adults who had resided in Polk State Center. With the influx of individuals back into the community, many new day services were established to teach the adults vocational and basic literacy skills.

That same year, the Barber Center also opened a satellite in Girard to serve adults in western Erie County with facility-based vocational training and developmental training.



In 1990, the Barber Center expanded beyond Erie County with the opening of day support programs and group homes in the Philadelphia area. In 1999, group homes and a day support program opened in suburban Pittsburgh.

As the century was drawing to a close, the Barber Center embarked on a new phase of its mission to serve individuals with disabilities. With tremendous community support, the Barber Center launched Project 2000, a capital campaign to create a National Institute in Erie for research, education and state-of-the art services in the field of disabilities.

With the new facilities, the Barber National Institute is better able to share its knowledge and expertise with professionals, and deliver quality diagnostic and treatment services to individuals and families around the nation and the world.



The Dr. Gertrude A. Barber Center is a 501(c)(3) charitable organization.



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