

KNOW YOUR MADISONIAN | CHAD THOM

Know Your Madisonian: MSCR's pioneer in inclusion, pontoon program, eyes retirement after 38 years

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Chad Thom is retiring after 38 years with Madison School & Community Recreation, where he spearheaded efforts to include people of all abilities in its programs -- a number of which he developed, including the popular pontoon boat program.
PAM COTANT, FOR THE STATE JOURNAL

Chad Thom, who spearheaded efforts to include people of all abilities in Madison School & Community Recreation programs a number of which he developed — is retiring June 30 after 38 years with the organization.

Thom, 65, initiated the pontoon boat program that had its roots in accessibility and now typically serves more than 6,000 people annually and is supported by 85 volunteer drivers.

He also started MSCR adaptive recreation, inclusion services, youth soccer and some outdoor adventure programs. In 2017, MSCR received a National Recreation and Park Association Award for its work on adaptive recreation and inclusion services.

Every year, 5,200 youth and adults are typically served in the inclusion and adaptive recreation programs, 4,000 in youth soccer and 200 in skiing.

When he started at MSCR in 1980, Thom said, inclusion in schools was being promoted locally and nationally. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was passed in 1990, prohibiting discrimination based on disability.

One of Thom's early efforts was integrating all of MSCR's day camps despite controversy between some people who wanted to keep the specialized programs and some who wanted inclusion. But his goal was and continued to be getting people with disabilities integrated into all MSCR programs. Thom helped build the integration efforts over many years, and now the entire organization works as a team to foster inclusion.

What is your background and how did you come to MSCR?

In high school I took some psychology classes and I decided I wanted to work with people with disabilities. Our high school volunteered with kids with disabilities. We took them roller skating on Saturdays and did other activities.

I studied psychology at Michigan State and my first job was a manager where I supervised recreational therapists at a center for people with developmental disabilities in Michigan. Then I went back to Michigan State to get a master's degree in therapeutic recreation. Shortly after that I was hired in 1980 by Madison School & Community Recreation as a supervisor.

I just wanted to help people. I took a (personality inventory test) and I was off the charts in wanting to help people so I said, "Well, I better do that." I felt an affinity for (working with people with disabilities).

How did you get involved in the programs you now administer?

Most of the programs I now administer I started. It was the first full-time position that was created to develop programs for people with disabilities. I sought a lot of input from the community in the early years of program formation.

Tell me the story about how you established the pontoon boat program.

It started with an early effort to get youth with disabilities fishing out on the lakes. There was a day camp for people with disabilities at Olin Park but the lake access was really shallow so you couldn't really fish there. Someone from the parks department knew of a pontoon that wasn't being used by the DNR, which donated it. The program started small with one driver and about 10 to 15 trips.

At first (in 1982), it was a program just for people with disabilities. Within 10 years, we decided we had space for everybody. From there, the numbers really went up. We didn't have to turn people with disabilities away.

Within the last five to 10 years, fundraising by the Friends of MSCR and donations from volunteer boat drivers has allowed the program to upgrade the fleet with three new fully accessible boats built specifically for the program.

Why do you think your programs have grown over time?

It's all sorts of different reasons. It's good program structure, consistent community outreach, recruiting and hiring good staff and consistent volunteer recruitment and training. I tried to always seek constant input from my volunteers and staff for continued improvement. I promoted an environment where staff and volunteers are an important component in the program. They felt, I think, invested in the program.

Are there any things that set your programs apart from others around the country?

It's the size of our inclusion and adaptive programs. Basically I couldn't keep up with the inclusion work early on. We now have two staff members and they do all the legwork. The whole department is invested in inclusion — all the other leaders across the programs. It's not just a couple people doing the work now. Now the system is there for that work to continue.

What do you hope people get out of the programs you run overall?

Personal enjoyment and maintaining and developing good physical and emotional health. They can get out of the house, meet new friends and learn a new skill.

What do you plan to do with your time once you retire?

I'm a golfer so I'm going to take a break this summer and just golf. I volunteer with Special Olympics so I also am going to continue with that. I also am going to spend more time with my family. I have an 18-year-old at home and a child with a disability. (Thom has six children, including one who was born with Down syndrome 11 years after Thom started his job at MSCR.)

I also have two grandchildren. That keeps you busy, too.