

# Celebrating 50 Years of Hiawatha Homes Desperation and Opportunity

January 2026

There were no good options.

There were three homes in the entire state of Minnesota that provided care for children with disabilities. One was in Minnetonka. The other two were outstate. In-home services did not exist. Larry and Janet Johnson were struggling. Their son, Steve, was born in 1967. By the age of one, he had developed frequent, prolonged grand mal seizures, and it was clear that Steve had severe physical and intellectual disabilities. He needed specialized medical care, physical therapy, and support for learning.



2018: Larry and Janet Johnson  
Millie and John Ellingson

Unbeknownst to the Johnsons, another Rochester family was struggling. John and Millie Ellingson's son Dan, also born in 1967, likewise had severe physical and intellectual disabilities. His hyperactivity and frequent grand mal seizures precluded his participation in the limited day programs available at the time.

Both boys required constant care. Both families had other small children who needed attention. It was overwhelming.

Medical professionals recommended placement in a children's home. Ultimately, both boys were placed in Home of the Angels in Minnetonka. It was a nice neighborhood. It provided nursing care, physical therapy, and occupational therapy. But it was not an ideal solution.

*Parents could visit only once a month on the third Sunday, from 2:00 pm - 5:00 pm. No other visits or visitors were allowed -- not other family members including siblings and grandparents, not friends.*

It was in the parking lot of Home of the Angels while waiting for their monthly visit that the Johnson and Ellingson families first met.

Over time, the situation at Home of the Angels deteriorated. Services were dropped. The facility became overcrowded. Dan's physical health declined, and after yet another hospitalization the Ellingsons did not take Dan back to the Home of the Angels. Not long after, the Johnsons learned from WCCO News that Home of the Angels was closing -- in one week! Steve and Dan were placed in the Rochester Social Adaptation Center located in the former state hospital; however, it was overcrowded, understaffed, and lacked the comprehensive services that the boys needed.



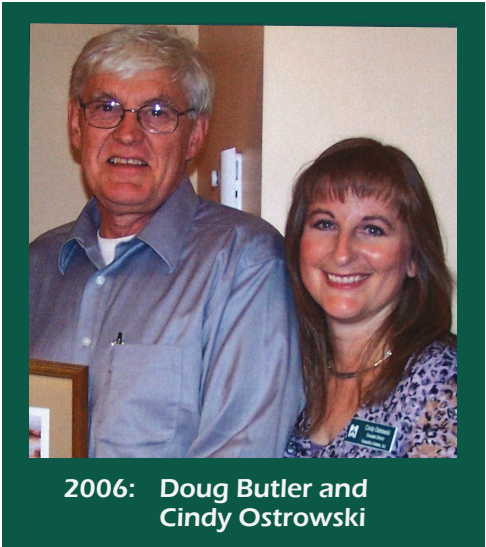
1976: The Original Children's Home



1982: The Adult Home

In 1973, the two sets of parents met around the Ellingsons' kitchen table. They knew what they wanted for their children: A home where children with the most significant needs could live in a supportive environment with family involvement. Concurrently, the state of Minnesota was moving towards community-based services rather than institutional care. Thus began an odyssey which has changed the entire approach to care for individuals with disabilities in Minnesota.

The families engaged the Rochester community. They met with bankers, legislators, county commissioners, and administrators, the county attorney, church groups, and community organizations. They printed and handed out brochures. They gave talks to "any group that would have them." They were able to purchase land on which to build the original homes from the Sisters of Assisi Heights. Larry Johnson met with legislators at the state capital, persuading them to approve revenue bonds thus initiating a model that was subsequently used to fund other non-profit organizations including Samaritan Bethany in Rochester.



2006: Doug Butler and  
Cindy Ostrowski

In 1976 the doors of Hiawatha Children's Home opened.

Originally, Hiawatha Children's Home offered residential and respite care. In subsequent years, more homes were added. The first adult home was opened in 1982. Waivered services were introduced in Minnesota in 1984 in a move towards ending institutional care and providing funding for home and community based care. In-home services were added, supporting individuals living in family homes. The Hiawatha Homes Foundation was incorporated in 1983 to facilitate fund-raising; John Ellingson served as the first president.

Byron Quinn and Ann Ferguson, who helped develop the model for Hiawatha Homes with the Johnson and Ellingson families, served as early leaders. Douglas Butler, who was also instrumental in developing the organization, became the director in 1978; he was succeeded by Cindy Ostrowski in 2006.

Over the past 50 years, Hiawatha Homes has provided a home to a least 280 individuals; many more have been served by in-home and respite services. Steve Johnson and Dan Ellingson shared a Hiawatha Home until sadly both died in 2022. Nevertheless, both the Johnson and Ellingson families have continued to be active in Hiawatha Homes community, and to advocate for the needs of individuals with disabilities. Their original goal - to provide a home where individuals with the most significant needs could live in a supportive environment with family involvement -- is unchanged. Individuals we serve have autonomy, and with the guidance of family and guardians choose the lives they want to live. They participate in organizational activities, day programs and community events. Some individuals are employed.

*Importantly, family and friends may visit at any time.*

As we look towards our future, the leadership and staff of Hiawatha Homes remain committed to providing compassionate, quality care to the individuals we serve. In the coming year we will share monthly stories with you in celebration of our 50th anniversary.

I want to support 50 more years!

Our Story Begins With Home

HIAWATHA HOMES

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hiawathahomes.org/50

Consider becoming a monthly donor where \$50 a month support Hiawatha Homes for years to come.

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