Delray Stephens likes to tell people that Happy Valley Day Facility is a peaceful place to spend the day—and it is.

Happy Valley has been providing adult day care in Columbus since 2009, when Stephens, a special education teacher, and Tamiko Parker decided to meet a need they saw in the community.

Parker had been working as a manager in a psychiatrist’s office and grew weary of people staring at or ignoring people who had been diagnosed with developmental disabilities.

When they acted out, she made it a point to go and talk to them—a simple act of kindness that worked wonders and made her want to do even more to help. She began dreaming of creating a place in Columbus where people with developmental disabilities could be welcomed into a community and a routine that would foster their personal growth.

Parker, Stephens and Joyce Harris, a licensed practical nurse, worked together to establish the Happy Valley Day Facility, and it opened its doors in 2009.

Adults ages 18 and up who have been diagnosed with developmental disabilities are welcome to attend Happy Valley on weekdays between the hours of 8 a.m. and 4 p.m.

The success of their first location at 3301 13th Street prompted Parker and Stephens, co-owners and directors, to scout out another location that would support the increasing interest.

In 2012, Happy Valley opened its second location at 600 2nd Avenue in Columbus.

“I do it because I love it,” Parker said. “I just love the closeness we have here. The people here are not just individuals to me, I think of them as my children.”

The behavioral problems they have are just like anyone else, Parker said. The exception is that most people are able to verbalize that they are having a bad day and don’t want to talk, but someone with a developmental disability might immediately resort to startling behavior like yelling, making noises or biting.

“When I didn’t do this, I used to stare, too,” said Parker. “But now I’m like, ‘What are you staring at?’ It’s just a different look, and in their inner selves it’s just sweetness.”

Days at Happy Valley provide socialization, community integration, exercise, skills training and a routine that becomes beloved to the adults. Activities range from swimming, picking fresh fruit, scavenger hunts, karaoke, arts and crafts, practicing money management and pizza parties.

“We love our staff, and they love what they do,” Parker said. “If this isn’t something you have in your heart, then it is not for you. We teach our staff to treat them like they are their children. Would you want your loved one to be treated with anything less than dignity, respect, courtesy, compassion and understanding?”

Caring for a loved one 24/7 can be exhausting, and the specially trained staff at Happy Valley is committed to providing quality care and compassion while giving full-time caregivers a break, said Parker.

People oftentimes do not realize the number of helpful services available, and the staff at Happy Valley are eager to assist people in accessing resources.

Financial aid is available for individuals interested in Happy Valley. A screening form needs to be filled out to see whether the individual qualifies for a waiver from NOW and COMP, Source or the Community Care Service Program.

Happy Valley meets with each adult and caregiver to create an individualized plan of care, including specific goals for the adult to work on each week.

The goal could be as basic as taking off their coat, putting it on a hanger and hanging it in the closet. Some of the individuals will accomplish goals quickly, but for others a single goal may take years to complete. Sometimes the goals need to be modified or adjusted, depending on the individual’s progress.

Parker has seen incredible progress in many of the adults at Happy Valley. Some have gone from not speaking at all when they first arrived to comfortably talking and carrying on conversations.

Independence is a common goal for many of the adults, and a job is a big part of that goal, said Parker. Happy Valley offers supportive employment, where clients can train for the job field they are most interested in, whether it be working outdoors, with people or animals, and so forth.

After training, the supportive employment program helps the client find a job in the community. Happy Valley also provides a job coach, who accompanies each person to work as long as needed to ensure the job is a good fit.

For information about Happy Valley Day Facility or to sign your loved one up for the services available there, contact Tamiko Parker at 706-322-7199 or visit happyvalleyofcolumbus.com.