Larry Thayer ’70, president and CEO of Cape Abilities, a nonprofit organization committed to serving people with disabilities on Cape Cod.
Social and rehabilitation services classes were among several electives Larry Thayer '70 took as a political science major looking to meet graduation requirements and take advantage of Assumption’s broad liberal arts curriculum. An “Intro to Rehabilitation Services” class and a related internship opened a window for him on the often unseen challenges people with physical or intellectual disabilities face daily. Combining what he learned in the classroom with the real-life experience of his internship sparked in Thayer a sense of purpose and great passion for the human services career that has consumed and compelled him for the past four decades to help people with disabilities live productive, independent lives.
Choosing to help

“As an undergraduate, I had an internship in Worcester,” Thayer said. “I saw a side of life I had not seen growing up in Connecticut. I saw that people had needs and that they were struggling. It was then that I decided to be in a helping profession.”

That decision led Thayer on an unanticipated career path. Rather than join VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) after graduation as he had planned, he accepted a full scholarship to stay on at Assumption and earn a master’s degree and certificate of advanced graduate studies (CAGS) in rehabilitation counseling, which he completed in 1972. While in graduate school, he met his wife, Margaret “Beth” Munn G’72, also working on a master’s degree and CAGS.

“Having a liberal arts degree has been very helpful for me,” Larry said. “I learned how to think, to communicate and to write effectively. You can easily apply the courses I had, like philosophy, physics and logic, when you have a vision of where you want to go and how to get there.”

Four decades in human services

“There” for Thayer has been a four-decade career in human services, which took him to Cape Cod in 1974, and where, since 1990, he has been president and executive director of Cape Abilities, a nonprofit organization committed to serving people with disabilities on Cape Cod through education, counseling, housing, employment, transportation and a litany of other therapeutic and social support services and opportunities. Under Thayer’s leadership, Cape Abilities has broadened its services and expanded its reach on the Cape from Bourne to Provincetown. Just as important, Thayer has worked to strengthen Cape Abilities financially through forward-thinking real estate purchases, business acquisitions and strategic partnerships with other Cape-based businesses.

Cape Cod’s protected shore, high-duned beaches and abundance of hiking, biking and birding trails make it a dream destination for tourists and retirees. But it was a job, not relaxation, that first attracted Thayer to the Cape early in his career. His first job, based in Fitchburg, was area director for the Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission (MRC). When the same position opened up on the Cape, he wanted it. During the interview, Thayer told the hiring committee that he was perfect for the position because he “could make a decision.” They tested his claim by offering him the job on the spot. “I had to show them that I really could make a decision, so I said ‘yes,’” he said. “Then I went home to tell my wife that I had just accepted a job on Cape Cod. We moved to the Cape shortly after the Christmas holidays.”
Bringing together business and social services

“On the surface, the Cape seems to be an idyllic utopia,” Thayer said. “But historically, Cape Cod has a high rate of substance abuse, single-parent families and salaries that don’t meet the cost of living. There is need for the services we offer. Cape Abilities has one foot in the business community and the other in social services. Recently named Business of the Year by the Hyannis Chamber of Commerce, the goal is to create employment and a revenue stream. It allows us to be more independent than if we had to rely on traditional human services funding sources. Raising substantial funds—more than $1 million last year—has enabled Cape Abilities to operate with revenues exceeding expenses for 18 consecutive years.”

Cape Abilities’ three main businesses include a vending machine operation, filling 30,000 Welcome to Cape Cod Beach Buckets for distribution to summer renters and the eight-acre Cape Abilities Farm and Farm Stand on Route 6A in Dennis. At the farm, several wheel-chair accessible greenhouses produce more than 35,000 pounds of hydroponically-grown tomatoes and other produce for sale to the public and local high-end restaurants. Cape Abilities’ tomatoes placed eighth in the 2008 Commonwealth Tomato Festival in Boston.

“On the surface, the Cape seems to be an idyllic utopia, but there is need for the services we offer.”

“For everything we do at the farm, we raise the money first,” Thayer said. “We have tomatoes from mid-May until Christmas. The hydroponic technology is fascinating. The tomato plants are not grown in soil, but inside greenhouses where we feed them with a mineral- and nutrient-filled solution that is pumped into the trays where the plants rest. Bees pollinate the crops. We supply some of the finest restaurants on the Cape with our tomatoes. The success and visibility of our tomato enterprise creates a greater awareness of what we’re doing. We couldn’t have timed the business better because today people want to eat local and eat healthy. Demand for our tomatoes exceeds our crop.”

Increasing opportunity and choice

Beyond the produce and revenue stream the farm produces, planting, caring for, harvesting and selling the harvest provides jobs and learning opportunities for people with disabilities, moving them toward greater independence. “I try to make sure that all of our programs are providing choice and satisfaction for our clients and our employees. We try to increase opportunities for people in our programs to make informed choices about their lives. Going to work is a powerful thing for people.”

With 230 employees, including associate executive director Jeff McCarthy ’69; a $10.5-million budget and nearly 20 locations serving hundreds of people on the Cape, Cape Abilities is growing, thriving and enjoying increased visibility. Featured in the Boston Globe and New York Times and on the CBS Evening News, Cape Abilities is creating “buzz,” which brings more support and partnership opportunities, Thayer said. In addition to an invitation to participate in Willie Nelson’s Farm Aid Concert, he is especially proud that Cape Abilities was one of 35 nonprofits nationwide invited as special guests of the Stafford Foundation to attend the People’s Inaugural, where a Cape Abilities contingent enjoyed “front-row seats” at the presidential inauguration festivities.

Every day is different

The recent acquisition of a waterfront 18th-century farm on seven acres in Marston Mills offers new program and partnership opportunities. Thayer foresees working with a living history museum to demonstrate historic and contemporary (hydroponic) farming methods. “There are times when I ask myself ‘why am I taking on another project,’ but I love to work, love to have fun and be creative. Every day is different. I’ve learned that there isn’t only one answer.”

Thayer also has learned that decisions can have unexpected impacts that are life-changing.

“I don’t think that people realize that choosing a college is more than an academic decision,” he said. “I didn’t want to apply to Assumption at first because I thought it was too close to home. But as soon as I got to campus, I knew it was where I wanted to be. Overall, my liberal arts education there was superb. It prepared me to deal with a wide range of experiences and people.”

It also opened Thayer’s eyes to a different world, one in which people struggle and need help. Four decades later, he is still working full-tilt to improve the quality of daily life and choices available to people with disabilities. Visit Cape Abilities online at www.capeabilities.org.