

# AS SEEN IN *Forbes & Fortune*

EXTRAORDINARY WOMEN IN BOSTON



## Mission First

Under the dynamic leadership of Rita Gardner, human service provider Melmark is elevating the field.

**A**dvocacy for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities may seem like work for Capitol Hill, but for Rita Gardner and Melmark, it's a calling that begins on the local level.

"We're a mission-based organization," says Gardner, president and CEO. "Today, we stay within Melmark's original mission: to serve people close to home—because no one should have to travel far to receive high-quality services."

Melmark's storied legacy complements its exponential growth—from a 35-room home in Berwyn, Pennsylvania, in 1965 to expanded day and residential programs and services for children and adults as well as two comprehensive special education schools in Massachusetts, one in Pennsylvania, and one in North Carolina. Creating change on the local, state, and national policy levels; providing unmatched, evidence-based programming across three divisions; and publishing the latest in clinical training and research, Melmark and Gardner are accelerating the future of human services.

### Leading With Passion and Pride

Service is personal for Gardner, whose parents exemplified giving back and a strong faith. Her childhood friendship with a neighbor who had developmental disabilities catalyzed her determination to make a

difference. "We saw her as one of the gang, but she experienced profound disabilities," Gardner recalls. "I looked past that and just saw my childhood neighbor, Sarah."

Dedicating her professional career to advocating for people with disabilities, Gardner cofounded Melmark New England in Boston in 1998; the organization's 25th anniversary is in 2023. Under her leadership, Melmark's three divisions have grown in range of services and drive.

Most important, though, is Gardner's emphasis on providing quality service through cultivating quality educators and clinicians. Whether helping to launch a first-of-its-kind behavior analyst graduate certification program in Massachusetts for those serving people with intellectual disabilities or mentoring the next generation of female leaders, she champions personal and professional growth to help elevate the field.

Melmark's physical expansion is also central to enhancing quality, as Gardner led the charge in funding, building, and opening an almost \$18 million state-of-the-art special education school in Pennsylvania. Launched in 2022, the center boasts innovative classrooms designed with input from clinicians and educators as well as a training room for continuing education and professional development.

"We are an evidence-based applied behavior analytic organization," says Gardner. "We continually build our employees' skills, credentials, and capacity to improve the overall quality and diversity of our staff, which impacts and improves the quality of our services."

### More Than Massachusetts

Providing programs to individuals with disabilities through local services is imperative to ensure equitable treatment for all. Melmark's political advocacy is making waves in quality, close-to-home services.

"When you make the question personal—if I became disabled, how would I want my child or myself to be treated?—it shapes the conversation," Gardner says. "It becomes more about ethics, dignity, and quality of life."

Under the leadership of a vetted team, Melmark advocates for increased support for those they serve, and is poised for continued growth as it opens new schools in the Carolinas and Massachusetts and publishes research and resources through the new EnvisionSMART™ Institute.

"We are intentional in our program design. The work Melmark does contributes to a broader body of evidence about supportive treatments and the importance of skill building for everyone whose lives can improve, allowing them to live a more fulfilling life. Isn't that what we all want? A fulfilling life?"



# Melmark

Mission First. Every Individual, Every Day.®

461 River Road | Andover, MA 01810 | 978-654-4300 | melmark.org