



After the bus stops coming

Spectrum for Living celebrates 25 years of servicing disabled adults

Ours is an unusual family," says Kate O'Brien. She leans forward in her seat as if though she is confiding a secret, but her big voice exudes a certain sense of pride.

Kate is the mother of 10 children. It was not until after she had given birth to her last child that the family discovered that Kate's husband, Vince, had a chromosomal anomaly that left their children missing a piece of one of their chromosomes. As a result seven of the 10 were left with a variety of disabilities, from the behavioral to the physical.

Kate and Vince raised their children at home, the best way they knew how. But it didn't take long before they started wondering what would happen to their sons and daughters when they no longer had Mom and Dad there to take care of them.

"At some point," says Vince, "you have a 63-year-old man with no mother or father, no skills, and he's helpless."

The O'Briens were not alone in their concerns, but unlike the many parents who preceded them, they had a place to turn



Among many recreational activities, the non-profit Spectrum for Living holds a "Spectrum Idol" singing contest for its developmentally disabled residents. Vinnie, above, practices his "Spectrum Idol" routine with the help of James, a recreational therapist at Spectrum. Tommy, top left, joins in the musical fun.

when their grown children needed support: Spectrum for Living.

Spectrum for Living, a non-profit organization, was founded in 1983 by four mothers and one father who found common ground on the fear of what would happen when their

disabled children became disabled adults. It is a fear that Spectrum CEO Carmine Marchionda summarizes with a simple question: "What happens when the bus stops coming?" In other words, when children are too old to receive state-funded special education, where do they go?

"At that time there was no place for them," says Alex Gallione, a founding member of Spectrum.

There was talk of a bake sale to raise money, but it was through grant money and small donations that Spectrum got its start, first with an office in Hackensack and finally a group home in Closter for adults with autism,

epilepsy and other disabilities requiring medical support.

"We had finally gotten to the position where our kids would be served," says Gallione, whose son Jeffrey has cerebral palsy. "We made the decision that we could not stop there."

Now celebrating its 25th year of service to Bergen County's developmentally disabled, Spectrum for Living boasts a network of 650 employees, 800 clients, and about 30 sites, including 19 residential facilities and six adult training centers across Bergen County, including Westwood, River Vale and Hillsdale.

The original Closter facility is currently undergoing an expansion, and Spectrum recently acquired a beach house at the Jersey Shore, donated by the family of one of its clients.

Spectrum offers recreational opportunities for able residents, including theater outings and sporting events, trips to the circus, "canteens" with games and music, a barrier-free softball league and a deep-sea fishing adventure. Residents even participate in activities that many would consider mundane, such as attending local churches and voting.

Spectrum also provides assistance to families who are not clients, but who need help finding resources and navigating the state's social services bureaucracy.

To put the organization's growth into a financial perspective, Gallione says Spectrum's first donation was \$300; last year, Spectrum operated on a

SPECTRUM FOR LIVING CALENDAR OF EVENTS 2008

WALK-A-THON

September 14 (Bergen County)

September 21 (Middlesex County)

25TH ANNIVERSARY DINNER GALA

To honor Senator Richard Codey, with Honorary Chair Lorraine Bracco. November 22

For more information about events, contact Spectrum for Living at 201-358-8000.

\$36 million budget.

"It's astonishing. But are we there yet? Absolutely not. The demand out there is more than ever."

To meet this demand, Spectrum is counting on the continued support of volunteers and generous donors.

"One of the important things to understand is state funding is insufficient," says Christine LaRocca, the Spectrum for Living Board of Trustees Chair and the sister of a Spectrum client. "The funding that was provided 25 years ago has not increased proportionately. The state provides nothing for recreational activities. The quality of life of our clients is absolutely dependent on the money that we can raise."

LaRocca's younger brother, Steven, is 38 years old and lives in the River Vale housing facility.

"He's incredibly happy," she



Rina, a Spectrum for Living resident, gets into the groove while practicing for the "Spectrum Idol" singing competition.

says. "Having Spectrum enabled my parents to put their heads on the pillow at night and sleep without worries."

Three of the O'Brien's children have been serviced by Spectrum. Austin died more than a decade ago, but Mary and Domenic continue to thrive.

"Spectrum has been God's blessing," Kate says, who calls

Gallione her "male Mother Theresa."

Gallione knows that his son Jeffrey, now 51 and living in a Norwood group home, will also grow old with dignity and support.

"But I worry about the kids who are four or five years old in the special services school. Are we going to be ready to take care of them? I feel tears

welling up; I can't help it.

These kids, they didn't ask to be disabled. They don't complain about being disabled. You want to try and do anything you can for them. You don't want their lives to be mundane." ❖

Spectrum for Living,
201-358-8000,
www.spectrumforliving.org.

BY MAGGIE FAZELI FARD

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