

JESPY House: one of the best-kept secrets in the village

By Dennis Brady
Staff Writer

For the last 40 years, a dedicated group located on Prospect Street in South Orange has been working with area adults with disabilities who are striving to live independent lives. The staff of JESPY House assists clients ranging in age from 19 to 69 in developing essential life skills. This nonprofit organization promotes the efforts of both self-direction and community integration within Maplewood and South Orange.

JESPY House first opened in 1978 with just three staff members and four clients with a variety of disabilities. Through the years, the organization has been able to give disabled adults a family-like living opportunity tailored to their levels of independence. In 1998, through the contribution of the Laurie Foundation, the organization purchased a private residence in the community to provide housing that both teaches and promotes the self-reliance that JESPY House tirelessly works to instill in its clients. Today, five homes are part of a "shared housing" program, all within walking distance of the original JESPY House. Approximately 35 clients live in JESPY House facilities, and the staff serves more than 120 clients who live independently in apartments or condominiums within the Maplewood-South Orange community.

Audrey Winkler, the new executive director of JESPY House, emphasized that clients do not simply reside in South Orange and Maplewood — they lead full lives that are integrated within the community at large.

"As JESPY House has grown in size and scope, so too has our impact on the local community," Winkler told the News-Record recently. "Today JESPY serves 240 clients, most of whom live in South Orange, enjoying solid relationships with their neighbors and landlords. Clients frequent local shops, restaurants and food markets, contributing to the local economy. Through our long-term multilevel



JESPY House, above, provides myriad services and programs for adults with disabilities who are working to live independent lives within the community.

interactions, local residents, landlords, municipal service providers and business owners accept and value our clients for the important role they play as contributing citizens of our community."

According to Winkler, the transition services provided by JESPY House create an easier transformation to adulthood. The JESPY House helps to gradually move clients from a high school classroom to their day program and recreation department. This transition service provides opportunities for the clients to try new things, meet new individuals with disabilities within the community and work toward independent living.

Michelle Rampersant-Faulk, the work-readiness and employment-engagement supervisor at the organization, said JESPY House's main goal is to get its clients out into

the world with the tools they need to succeed.

"JESPY House's goal is to provide clients with the resources they need to be as independent as possible, therefore preparing clients for the workforce and supporting them with work-related challenges is an enormously important element of our program," Rampersant-Faulk told the News-Record. "Nearly 200 of our clients depend on our work-readiness and employment-engagement department for information, guidance and support to help them to be successful. Some clients work or volunteer at local businesses in South Orange and others take local transportation to jobs in the greater Essex County area."

Rampersant-Faulk's department uses up-to-date practices to try to prepare the clients as much as possible for job positions they could find in the community. This training is both on-site and off as JESPY House creates a personal performance plan for each client to monitor and strive for their set goals. This department helps clients take an active role in the community by partnering with local businesses, synagogues, churches and other Maplewood-South Orange staples.

Among JESPY House's many offerings, a cultural arts program allows for development in the expression of clients' thoughts and emotions and for finding self-confidence. The cultural arts include activities ranging from creative writing to yoga to graphic design.

Community-based supports supervisor Tara Roberts said that seeing the clients of JESPY House succeed is felt as a personal success for each staff member.

"I support our clients' desire to lead full, productive, independent lives and connect with the community they live, work and socialize in," Roberts told the News-Record. "I admire their zest for life, their passion for all that JESPY House provides them with, the way they support one another. It makes me proud to be part of an organization which empowers individuals to be all they can be despite the many challenges they face in their daily lives."

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