

Turning a House in to a Home

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Turning A House Into a Home

By Candy Neal

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Living with family can be a hassle at times. Having a roommate or two can be a challenge.

But imagine living with six adults who are no relation to you.

"It's different," Chris Fessler said of his Owl House home. He should know. He's been living at the Jasper residence with Lisa Hahn, Sharon Reising, Sandy Bloyd and Tim Sanders for the past 12 months. A married couple, Lillian and Harry Parks, also live in the house, at the southeast corner of State Road 56 and St. Charles Street.

"We're used to it," Tim says, "used to each other."

The house is corporately sponsored through a program started by Anderson Woods. The organization serves handicapped adults and helps them function as independently as possible through permanent residences and a summer camp.

Stens Corporation sponsors the house and helped residents move in in March 2000. At that time the house parent was Carla Aders.

A year later, the house and its residents are still there — minus the original house parent. Aders left in August for health reasons, a testament to how stressful the job of house parent can be.

"This isn't easy," said Lillian Parks, who runs the house with her husband, Harry. "It's very hard."

Part of the challenge is getting the public to understand that people with disabilities are people first. They can function just as well in a home setting as any family.

"We're not bad people," Harry said, speaking for the residents he oversees. "Get to know us and give us a chance."

Tim is already moving into his "apartment" above the garage early this Friday morning. Other residents are due this afternoon after work.

With a separate entrance (through the garage) and bathroom, Tim likes the feeling of independent living.

"I like being on my own," he says. "When I want to dance, I turn on the music and dance. And I make sure it's clean, too."

The efficient 37-year-old helps movers, who are Stens employees, bring in the heavy stuff — beds and dressers — for his place and the rooms of his housemates. While two workers take Sandy's bed through the kitchen and up the stairs, Tim follows with parts of the frame. He ascends, leaves the frames on the floor, descends and shoots out the back door to grab Lisa's lightweight desk.

Tim seems the most independent of the bunch. Because he is not in the main building of the residence, it's not unusual for him to stay in his apartment and do things apart from the group, such as watch movies. "I got two movies from the library, and I'm halfway through one," he says. "I'll be done with them by Tuesday. And then they go back to the library."

Tim is an only child; his mother lives in Wadesville and his father in Evansville. "I stayed at the Martin House for years," he says, referring to another Anderson Woods residential home in Siberia in Perry County. (The Martin House has since been converted to a retreat center. A second residential home in Siberia, Lark House, is filled.)

"But I'm going to like it here. I liked it there too. But it was so far away from work."

"(Now) I'm close to my job, so I can ride my bike," he says.

In the past, residents left the Siberia home at 6:30 a.m., an hour earlier than they have to leave now. By living in Jasper, which is where all of them work, everyone gets to sleep in or relax a little longer in the morning. "You don't have to worry about driving so far to get to work," Sandy said of the new arrangement.

The nurturer of the bunch, Sandy, who works at Stens, shows concern for everyone. She helps Sharon do some of the more challenging jobs, like hanging photos on her bedroom wall. She wags her finger at Chris when he plays jokes on the other girls. And whenever visitors come to her attic-high room, she cautions them to duck while walking under the sloped ceiling.

"Chris came up and hit his head," she said sadly. "He wasn't careful."

"We've learned a lot from her," said Sandy Baker, inventory planning manager for Stens. "This experience has taught us that we have to have patience. We need to be more sensitive."

Sandy rides to work with a Stens employee. And when she had health problems, several people visited her and sent flowers "to let her know that we're thinking about her," Baker said. "We've really grown close to her."

Sandy's room is decorated in light pink and white and many of the open tabletops are adorned by family pictures as well as trophies and medals from Special Olympics. Her daybed sits in the corner, opposite the steps.

"I like it because I have a lot of room," the 53-year-old said. "If I want to think, I can go up there and think."

Mother to one, sister to three and stepsister to two, Sandy is also a comforter. She helps console Chris, whose sister, Tricia, died in an automobile accident recently.

"She was my favorite," Chris said solemnly. "Whenever I was at home, she always did things with me. She made sure she made time for me. She'd ask me to spend the night with her — and I do."

"I know how you feel," Sandy told Chris. "I had a sister who passed away. It's hard."

"I really miss her," he said.

This is a bit of a change for the usually happy-go-lucky, somewhat mischievous Chris. "Chris always picks on us," Sharon said.

"On us girls," Lisa added.

"I want to make you laugh," Chris, 35, said in defense. "They don't laugh enough."

"Oh, Chris, you're just silly," Lisa concluded.

He doesn't mind showing off his simple room, where wood color dominates. On his wall is a collage of photos of his friend Betty.

"These were taken at our Halloween party," he said, pointing out specific photos. "Betty is in a wheelchair, but she can walk some. I help her when she walks up stairs. I really like her."

Chris, who has two other sisters and two brothers, also helps the ladies in the house, like a "gentleman," he said. "I make sure they get across the street when we go to church," he said, "and I help Sharon find her pages in the church books. I like to help."

He likes the contact he has with the other residents, and with the community. The group is always doing something outside the house — church, bowling, picnics, movies, outdoor walks and parties, plenty of parties. Owl House residents get together with residents at the Dove House, on 20th Street in Jasper, to celebrate birthdays and some holidays.

"We see the others every day," Chris said. "With work and the stuff we do, I hardly have time to work on my computer."

When asked what kind of work he does on his computer, he grinned. "Play games," he said.

Chris' outgoing personality is very different from his demeanor when he was in high school. "When I was in school, I didn't talk much," he said. "The teachers thought something was wrong."

"But now I can't stop talking," he said.

Part of the reason is that Anderson Woods helps its residents build bonding, trusting relationships.

"They get a total family setting with a live-in house, with house parents who treat them as their own children," said Judy Colby, one of the founders of Anderson Woods. "Group homes have people who rotate three shifts a day. They don't have the longevity like we have with our houses."

By doing this, the whole person is tended to. "We concentrate on the physical, spiritual and emotional well-being of each person," she said.

Sharon, 46, gets assistance from everyone in the house to keep up with her schedule and chores. "I work at Burger King," she says, looking at the ceiling. "9:30 to 1:30. Is that right, Harry?"

Harry nods, affirming her schedule.

Her room is decorated with all kinds of ceramics — her passion. "I make them, and go places to get them," she says. With her Jobs+ coach Tonya VanHoosier, she goes to garage sales and thrift stores to look for the delicate pieces.

Each resident has a coach, who spends individual time with the resident outside the house. Coaches show clients how to interact in the community by taking them places such as the library, stores, parks

and restaurants.

Coaches also visit their clients' job sites to make sure everything is running smoothly for the employer and the client. If a client needs it, coaches give additional help or job training.

Lisa, 24, tends to stay in the background, careful not to draw a lot of attention to herself. She went into the spotlight, though, at Stens' Christmas party at the Holiday Inn, dancing with her housemates. Stens has tried to plan other activities with residents, but schedule conflicts and illness have gotten in the way. "We hope to do more with them in the future," Baker said. "They do a lot with the other house in Jasper (Dove House). They seem to stay busy."

Lisa's room has assorted photos on the wall, cassettes on the dresser and desk and an electric guitar sitting in the corner. She doesn't know how to play yet, but she will learn, she vows.

"I like music," she says. "I like hard rock." In her cassette collection, she also has tapes by Madonna and Celine Dion.

She works every day at Wendy's, which forces her to be in contact with the public. "Sometime I talk to a lot of customers, and sometimes I just help clean up," she says. But at home, she's pulled into the action, whether it's Chris dropping ice on her back and down her shirt ("He's done that before") or if it's dancing with Tim ("She's a good dancer," Tim proclaims) or if it's participating in outdoor fun, like camping at a cabin retreat in the summer.

"I remember when Harry jumped in the lake," Lisa says. "Remember that? His (fishing) pole got away from him, so he jumped in to get it."

"And I got it back," Harry says.

Lillian Parks, 56, and Harry Parks, 57, have worked at Anderson Woods homes for three years. "We feel this is a ministry. This is a calling to help the less fortunate," Lillian said, citing foster parenting the couple did for 10 years with the Debra Korn agency.

Harry took a break last February but came back in August when the couple moved into Owl House. "You have to have the heart for this job," Harry said. "As for neighbors, we haven't run into any problems." Besides coordinating schedules, the house parents also make sure residents socialize with them and each other; take care of their personal chores, including washing their clothes; and get plenty of healthy foods and exercise.

"Most of our people were overweight before they came here (to Anderson Woods)," Lillian said. But many have slimmed down. "We want our residents to be with us a long time," she said. "We want them to be healthy."

To maintain their personal health, the Parkses take off one day each week and one weekend each month; an assistant steps in at the house during those times. "We need time to ourselves too," Lillian said.

Each resident is responsible for him or herself and for contributing to the smooth running of the house.

Lillian and Harry are just the guides. "They want us to do for ourselves," Sharon said.

"It's our place to teach you all that you can learn."

The learning continues.

Owl House's first year in existence has survived the controversy associated with its sister house — Dove House. The protests from neighbors who tried to keep the house out of their neighborhood have died down. Now the house is almost full; there is one vacancy for a female resident.

"The problems at the beginning was just a fear of the unknown," Judy said. "Once they got past that, they found out that we're no different than any other home."

"The new house is working very well."

Harry agreed. "The past year has been good," he said. "Just having houses in Jasper is good."

None of Anderson Woods backing comes from government funds. Private donations are used to purchase homes, and money from residents and their families pay for the homes' operations.

In the future there will be more houses, depending on funding. "The need is there," Colby said.

On a typical Sunday at Owl House, the residents go to church in the morning, relax, watch videos or nap in the afternoon, and prepare for Sunday evening church services, should they choose to go.

In the middle of that, they sit down to eat dinner. Sandy sets the table, careful to make sure everyone has utensils and napkins. Tim and Lisa help Harry prepare food — opening vegetable cans and grabbing serving bowls. Sharon pours glasses of tea from a way-too-full pitcher, with Chris' help.

And they all say a prayer before sitting and enjoying their home-cooked meal and family time. Chris starts in on Sharon. "Sharon, if you change your age around, you'd be 64!"

"Cut it out, Chris," she says, smiling.

He chides on. "And you'd be 42, Lisa."

Lisa ignores him.

Just like a family.

