

## Helping hands-Center Offers Lives of Independence to Adults With Disabilities

By Karen Berkowitz

Leaving the nest is a milestone in any young adult's life, but it was an especially big step for Jill Futransky.

The 26-year-old gave up the security of her bedroom to move into a three-flat in northwest Evanston shared by six adults with disabilities.

Opening in late 2003, the venture marked the first community residence arranged by the Evanston-based Center for Independent Futures, an organization founded by parents frustrated with the dearth of state-supported; housing options for their offspring. The organization since has opened a second for four adults with special needs on Chicago Avenue.

Futransky and two other women share a spacious, three-bedroom apartment on the second floor of a red brick building on Harrison Street. Three men share the first-floor unit in the building, which is owned by a single investor. The third-floor apartment is occupied by a family, including an adult who functions as the "community builder" for the residence.

Monthly costs for rent, staff and support services run between \$1,800 and \$2,800 per resident, depending on each individual's particular need for services. Parents pick up much of the cost, supplementing other sources that may include Supplemental Security Income, job wages or Section 8 housing vouchers.

While the costs are beyond the means of many families, parents note that it's less expensive to allow individuals to live in their own communities with outside support than to house the disabled in institutional settings.

A recent report, the State of the States in Developmental Disabilities,

ranked Illinois as fourth lowest among the 50 states in use of small residential settings. Illinois also was fourth lowest in the percentage of funds allocated for community versus institutional programs for the disabled, according to the survey published by the Coleman Institute at the University of Colorado.

"We are trying to create a model that is financially feasible that the state can look at," said Jane Doyle, who co-founded the Center Independent futures and serves as the organization's executive director.

The organization also is committed to developing models with different legal and financial structures that can be replicated by other parents in their own communities.

Parents of special-needs children in Illinois bump into some harsh realities when their offspring reach the end of an educational system that has guaranteed them services from the age of 3 to 18 and, in some cases 21.

When their teens reach adulthood, they discover there is little or no funding to support the transition to independence. Waiting lists for housing are interminably long. Those spaces that do become available are needed to address emergencies that pop up when an elderly parent has died or can no longer care for their son or daughter. The openings often are located in southern Illinois, far from Cook County, where two-thirds of the state's disabled adults live.

"As hard as we fight and advocate for our kids while they are still in school, the adult life is so long," said Doyle. "That is really where the work needs to be done."

CIF co-founder Kay Branz said she felt a sense of betrayal by the special education professionals who, perhaps unknowingly had given her the false impression that job training and other services would be available for her daughter, Elise Hylton, after graduation from Evanston Township High School.

"I would have liked someone to have said 'there really is nothing.' I would

have preferred to hear the truth."

In researching options, both Branz and Doyle became aware of some progressive and largely state-funded models on the East Coast. "If New Haven, Connecticut can have supportive living situations for their young adults with disabilities, why can't Evanston, Illinois?" asked Branz. The two mothers founded the center after coming to the conclusion their time was best spent creating the ideal in Illinois rather than trying fix an overburdened and broken system.

While allowing residents enough independence to "productively fail" and learn from mistakes, the organization provides a system of support services tailored to the individual's needs.

When Jill Futransky landed a part-time job in December at a physical therapy office near the Old Orchard mall, her individual skills tutor helped her figure out how to get there via public transit. At other times, individual tutors also work with residents on budgeting, social skills and other issues.

"Jill has done a lot of problem solving that she would not have had the opportunity to do had she been living in our house," said her stepfather, David Miller.

"There have been a lot of highs, and there have been some lows, but the lows are just as important in one's development as the highs. They've helped her mature as a person."

Branz recalled a recent conversation with Elise when they were shopping for appropriate clothes to wear to her grandfather's funeral in Jamaica. As they were driving around, Elise turned to her mother and asked, "Who is going to help take care of me when you and Dad get old?"

"I now had an answer," said Branz, recalling her response. She told her daughter, "That is what we are all practicing at right now.

"We are building a community for you and a support network, so there are going to be lots of people in your life-always."