

*A new Palatine apartment facility gives developmentally disabled adults the joys of independent living, but in a structured environment. And their parents couldn't be happier.*

## On their own, but very far from alone

By Mary Ann Fergus  
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The scene at the young bachelors' first apartment looks typical with its framed car posters, electronic hockey table and two 20-something guys, who arrive from work and rush through chores and dinner before their weekly softball game.

But this represents more than just another rite of passage for Nick Kwiatkowski and roommate Jason O'Day. Developmentally disabled virtually their entire lives, the men are part of a grass-roots housing organization that recently opened an apartment building in Palatine for them and others.

The momentous step toward independence, once considered unfathomable, is becoming more common across the country, according to experts. Parents increasingly are taking housing matters into their own hands so loved ones can remain near family and friends but live on their own.

The trend bucks the Illinois-funded system, which supports nine institutions for the developmentally disabled and maintains notoriously long waiting lists for placement in group homes.

Kwiatkowski, 24, and O'Day, 25, were on state waiting lists for more than a decade. The men were getting tired of it, so their parents, yearning for peace of mind, helped set up a Schaumburg chapter of the Evanston-based Center for Independent Futures. In the last few years the center has opened three residential sites for the developmentally disabled.

"We're looking for our children to be as independent as they can in the commu-

nity, but we want the supports for them to be there," said Jan Lichtenberger, president of the Schaumburg group, which operates the apartment building in Palatine.

O'Day suffered a traumatic brain injury as a baby that left him cognitively delayed and paralyzed his left arm and hand. Kwiatkowski has Down syndrome.

The program provides them and other residents with an adviser who lives in one of the apartment units. Another adviser, Jeff Fredericks, teaches them safety and household skills.

On a recent afternoon, Fredericks stands in an empty second-floor apartment in the Palatine building and watches the young men as they arrive from work. Just a week earlier, Fredericks was meeting them at their bus stop and escorting them the half block to their apartment. Now they're doing it on their own.

"Nick is walking ahead of Jason again," Fredericks says, promising to remind them to stick together.

Moments later, Fredericks' cell phone rings. It's O'Day, who announces, "We're home."

For the next two hours Fredericks leads the men through vacuuming their bedrooms, handling laundry and making dinner before they head out for softball. Through each task, Fredericks emphasizes teamwork.

O'Day holds the lid of a liquid laundry detergent bottle over the washing machine, and Kwiatkowski pours in a half cup, spilling a bit on his friend's hand. Later, Kwiatkowski grabs two pot holders and carefully drains boiling water from a pot of pasta.

"It's a leap of faith, it really is," Fredericks say of the project. "They've never been on their own before."

### Costs still in flux

The first three residents moved into the Palatine home in July. Each pays \$450 in rent plus utilities. Families must also raise about \$5,000 each toward the center this year through raffles and other fundraisers or put in volunteer hours. Organizers are still determining the pro-

gram's total cost for families.

Fredericks and others volunteer time for the group, which hopes eventually to open other buildings and hire a staff, while still keeping costs affordable.

Lichtenberger figures her own daughter, Chrissy, who is 24 and has autism, won't move out on her own until the Schaumburg affiliate has acquired the support services to serve those with more intense needs.

The Evanston program charged about \$2,000 a month per resident when it opened three years ago, but now has a wider cost range, said the group's founder, Jane Doyle. Doyle said she shares her group's model with other parents in Illinois and across the country.

The idea, advocates say, is to extend into adulthood the can-do philosophy of early-intervention programs and mainstream classes for those with disabilities.

Advocates applaud such programs but note that the cost makes it prohibitive for many families.

"It's a great option, but not everyone has that capability," said Tony Paulauski, director of the Arc of Illinois, an advocacy group for people with disabilities that has pushed for more state-funded community services and small residential sites.

Illinois ranks among the lowest in the country in per capita spending on community-based services for people with disabilities, according to a biennial study by the University of Colorado and the Coleman Institute.

"We are definitely behind, woefully behind," said Tamar Heller, director of the Institute on Disability and Human Development at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

Lilia Teninty, the state's new director of the Division of Developmental Disabilities, concedes that she has "nowhere to go but up" and said she will be pushing to improve and expand community-based services and residential housing options.

### Routines take hold

Kwiatkowski and O'Day, long time friends, have already developed a Friday

night pizza and movie ritual. Both say they love living on their own, no longer answering to their mothers, even if they now must answer to Fredericks. They, too, are thinking of the future.

“He’s going to move out, and I’m going to have a girl move in here,” Kwiatkowski jokes. O’Day shrugs and laughs.

Jackie Olichwier, 31, who suffered spinal meningitis at age 4 that caused cog-

nitive delays, will move into an upstairs apartment with a lifelong friend at the end of the month.

Furniture and a flat-screen TV have been donated, but Olichwier’s sister recently threw her a housewarming shower for other necessities. Her mother, Carol, has been teaching her daughter how to sort laundry and read expiration dates on food.

Carol Olichwier said learning about

the housing organization was “like winning the lottery—like the heavens opened up.”

“I didn’t want it to get to the point where I’m elderly and my disabled child is still at home,” Carol Olichwier said. “They want more independence and they’re capable of more.”

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