

News

Adults with autism could find independence in Grafton

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Now News Group

In the early 1990s, Alan and Rebecca Goldman fought for their son, Michael, who has autism, to learn alongside his peers in an Ohio classroom.

Now, nearly three decades later, the Goldmans are fighting for their 32-year-old son to lead a typical adult life, with a job, friends and trips to the grocery store.

Because most group homes do not offer those types of opportunities, Rebecca Goldman plans to build an apartment community that does.

Goldman recently bought 7 acres of undeveloped land in Grafton, where she has submitted plans for an apartment community that would bring together 24 adults with autism and 20 graduate students from Concordia University.

The supportive housing community, called Woodside Prairie, would be at the northwestern corner of Hunter's Lane and Port Washington Road.

Woodside Prairie would include four six-bedroom homes for adults with autism. Each of the four homes would have a shared kitchen, living room and dining room. About half of the 24 bedrooms have already been reserved.

Next to those four homes, the Concordia graduate students would live in a building with 10 two-bedroom apartments. The development would also include a small community center.

The idea to mix adults with autism and graduate school students was motivated by a shortage of nearby housing options for Concordia University graduate students, as well as the desire to engage adults with autism in an integrated community setting.

The living arrangement would be ideal for Concordia students in the



Michael Goldman looks on as his father, Alan Goldman, browses through The Beatles' guitar song book. Alan and his wife, Rebecca Goldman, plan to build an apartment community in Grafton for Michael and other adults with autism. JEFF RUMAGE/NOW NEWS GROUP

physical therapy, occupational therapy and nursing fields, but the apartments are available to any student who wants to develop friendships with adults with autism.

The residents with autism at Woodside Prairie would be responsible for growing produce year-round in solar-powered hoop houses. The produce grown at Woodside Prairie would be used in community meals. Any extra food would either be sold or donated to food banks.

Woodside Prairie would be across the street from Meijer, where the residents would be able to pick up other food items.

Adapting to autism

Goldman, an attorney who serves on the board of directors for the Milwaukee Center for Independence and the Autism Society of Southeast Wisconsin, is an expert in the local autism community.

She said it was never her goal to be a trailblazer, that she was only trying to advocate on behalf of her son, Michael.

Autism was not well-understood in 1989, when Michael, then 3, was diagnosed. At the time, Goldman said, the prevailing wisdom was that autism was caused by emotionally cold mothers.

Through their research, the Goldmans learned that Michael would learn



Alan and Rebecca Goldman plan to build four six-bedroom buildings for adults with autism on Hunter's Lane in Grafton. The development will include a separate building with 10 two-bedroom apartments for Concordia University graduate students. RLD ARCHITECTURE AND CONSTRUCTION

best in a non-special education classroom with assistance from a trained aide. The Goldmans offered to pay for teachers to be trained at the public school district in Centerville, Ohio, where they were living at the time.

The Centerville School District refused the Goldmans' proposal, but offered to place Michael in a regular classroom for half the day and a special education class for the second half of the day.

The dispute motivated Rebecca to quit her job and go to law school. In her second year, she sued the Centerville School District — and won.

Like many others with autism, Michael continued to live with his parents after high school. He has tried to join the work force, but his inability to hold conversations or manage his emotions has made it difficult for him to hold a steady job.

Although he is not able to express complex thoughts verbally, he is able to type his thoughts using a machine. Rebecca said he has a high IQ, and that he

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taught himself to read at the age of 4. He enjoys listening to The Beatles, watching Jeopardy and auditing classes at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

Options are 'bleak'

Living at home is fine for now, but at 62 years old, Rebecca worries what will happen to Michael as she and Alan get older. They do not want Michael to live in a group home, where the staff is not specially trained in autism.

"There's a bed somewhere, but it's certainly not what I want for my son," Goldman said.

Goldman said the future is "bleak" for many adults with autism, as they are resigned to watching television on the couch for most of their adult life.

Goldman said she is aware of only a few places in the country that provide adults with autism with the specialized staff, recreational opportunities and productive lifestyle that she wants for Michael.

One of those places, Bittersweet Farms in northwest Ohio, gave her the idea to incorporate farming into her Woodside Prairie development.

Elsewhere in Wisconsin, other parents are also working to create homes for their adult children with autism. In New Glarus, parents are raising money for a 40-unit affordable apartment complex that would have 10 units reserved for individuals with disabilities.

Goldman believes they might be the first in the nation to integrate autistic and non-autistic adults into the same residential community. Some organizations are in the process of creating a



A 10-unit apartment building for Concordia University graduate students would neighbor four six-bedroom buildings for adults with autism as part of a supportive housing community proposed at Hunter's Lane and Port Washington Road in Grafton. RLD ARCHITECTURE AND CONSTRUCTION

community that would bring seniors and adults with autism together, but those facilities have not opened yet.

The Goldmans hope their model can be a concept that other communities can replicate.

"Whether we are the first, the second or the third doesn't matter to us," Alan Goldman said. "We want it to be sustainable so that (adults with autism) won't be cast adrift."

Finding funding

Group homes are often funded with a day rate that is inadequate to hire staff trained in autism.

Goldman hopes to provide a higher quality of living by combining the state IRIS funds received by each adult with autism in their community. By using IRIS funding — an acronym for "Include, Respect, I Self-Direct" — for all 24 autistic

residents, Goldman expects to hire employees at a higher rate than group home employees.

Woodside Prairie would staff roughly 10 employees from 6 a.m. to 8 p.m. At night, when residents are sleeping, one employee would staff each of the four buildings.

The two directors of Woodside Prairie are both trained as occupational therapists, Goldman said, and they know how to break down daily tasks to teach independence.

Goldman also hopes to bring in instructors such as Jackie Dorshorst. Dorshorst is certified in rapid prompting method, which claims to teach individuals with autism to communicate by pointing or typing letters with verbal or physical prompts from a facilitator.

Adults with disabilities also receive Supplemental Security Income from the federal government. A resident's SSI, or

their parent's Social Security funds, would be used to pay for food, clothing and maintenance of the building.

The Goldmans are working with Antonio Riley, the former Midwest regional administrator of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and a former executive director of the Wisconsin Housing and Economic Development Authority, to find developers who would help finance the construction with tax credits.

If all works according to plan, families of adults with autism would not have to contribute anything out of their pocket to Woodside Prairie. Goldman said some fundraising might be necessary.

For the project to move forward, Grafton village officials would also have to rezone the land from agricultural to multifamily residential zoning.

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