



Courtesy photos



Community living

Jewish nonprofit supports 45 adults in a variety of living arrangements

by Lynn Woike
Editor

Except for the high-top van and the number of vehicles parked in the driveway and on the street, 17 West Normandy Drive looks like any other single-family ranch house in town.

The five unrelated adults and the staff of 10 who care for them around the clock form a family.

"They're all best buds, good friends," said Denis Geary, executive director of the Jewish Association for Community Living for 26 years.

All three men and two women who live here are from West Hartford. Some of them attended school together. Some of their parents have known one another for more than 20 years.

"In some ways we brought families together," Geary said.

Residents share family style meals, celebrate birthdays and holidays, dine out, shop, go to the theater and take vacations together.

"Health and safety is our

highest priority. Then having fun is probably our second-highest priority," Geary said.

"Our staff are our most valuable asset," he stressed, lavishing praise on a core group of dedicated individuals – more than 1/3 – who have been with the agency a decade or more, some as long as 25 years.

"A lot of us go way, way back," he said. "We've known one another since the 1980s."

West Normandy is one of four group homes for adults with developmental or intellectual disabilities. They are part of a larger community-based system of living arrangements managed by JCL.

"As a Jewish organization, JCL continues to get the word out about our mission and our services over the last 36 years," Geary said.

The association was incorporated in 1982 using a model of personal empowerment, family relationships, community engagement and quality services to carry out its mission. It opened its first group home, for six adults, in 1983 on

Arapahoe Road. At the time, JCL had a management contract with HARC to oversee and operate that group home, and Geary was HARC's residential director.

It wasn't until 1993, when the board decided to open up a second home, that it also decided to hire an executive director and chose Geary for the position. That home opened in 1995 in a rented house on Lawler Road. In 2001, as JCL was preparing to open its third house, the owners of the Lawler property decided to sell. The women were relocated to a house on Brookmoor Road just months after opening the home on West Normandy.

Originally a house for four people, the garage was converted into a fifth bedroom in 2009 so that another West Hartford resident could move in.

JCL's most recent home opened on Brewster Road in November 2017.

"All of JCL's group homes have been successful," Geary said, noting that at this time, there are no plans

to open additional homes.

"We provide a lifetime of care," 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, Geary said, noting that two individuals have been with the JCL since it opened its first house in West Hartford Center.

Residents range from 21-82, with four 75 or older. As they have aged, their service needs have changed, he said.

All group homes are kosher, and the Jewish holidays and shabbats are celebrated with the help of part-time Judaic coordinators.

"It's an important part of our identity," he said.

In addition to the four group homes, JCL also supports about 23 men and women living in their own apartments or condominiums around town. They do not require 24-hour support and receive one to six hours of assistance a day, as determined by the state's Department of Developmental Services (DDS).

"Our folks live all around town, in areas such as Bishops Corner,

Farmington Avenue and West Hartford Center. We have people in three-family houses, two-family houses, apartments and condominiums. Some are clustered together, near each other, for better economy of scale with staffing," Geary said.

Sue Morris' daughter has lived in one of those supported sites for 20 years, moving in when she was 23.

"I worried about it. I really wanted her in a group home, but she wasn't funded to live in a group home," Morris said.

At the time, she was president of the JCL board and had helped open the first two homes.

"I've been involved from the time my daughter was young and I realized that she had some needs. I'd heard that Marlene [Scharr] was starting a group home and I approached her and said, 'I really want to get involved. Please let me know when and how.'

"I got very involved. We had an auxiliary – a social and fundraising arm of the organization – at one time. I was president of that more than once, and was president of the

main organization, having become a board member shortly after getting involved," she said.

Not all who need help can get it.

"Mothers begging for help; there's a million terrible stories," Morris said, explaining that state funding is not automatic and it appears that sometimes it's not

required, if you will, that the state has to provide services for all who need them," Morris said.

While at first she was crushed by the funding level her daughter received, she said having support services in her own apartment allowed her to be more independent, and that has been a blessing.

Geary said, "We have a wide

Community Foundation and the Jewish Federation of Greater Hartford also provide us with vital financial support," he said.

"When I started at JCL we had 10 employees. We now have almost 100. We had a \$400,000 budget, now it's \$3.6 million," Geary said.

What doesn't come from DDS comes from fundraising, individual donors and endowments. Eighty-seven cents of every dollar received is spent on programs and services.

In Jewish tradition, the number 18 has spiritual significance. Numerically, the word consists of the eighth and tenth letters of the Hebrew alphabet, which add up to 18, which is the word "chai" (roughly pronounced high), meaning life. It is customary to recognize 18 and its multiples, and this year marked JCL's 36th anniversary of assisting people with intellectual and developmental disabilities to live integrated lives in the community. It celebrated with a gala in October at Emanuel Synagogue.

Looking back to the first group home on Arapahoe Road, Morris

"As a Jewish organization, JCL continues to get the word out about our mission and our services over the last 36 years."

-Denis Geary

applied equally or fairly.

"We had to fight. There should be a better way to make things happen for more people," she said.

"DDS is the primary funder. They're not an entitlement operation. There are a lot of people waiting for services who are living at home with aging parents. There's no mandate, there's no obligation, there's no

range of funding levels for the people we support. In 95 percent of the cases, families need help from the state.

"Over 90 percent of our operating revenue comes from DDS. The rest comes from fundraising, individual donors and endowments.

"Our donors are mostly from the Jewish community. The Jewish



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West Normandy Road

Photos by Lyn Wolke

said, “That was like the shining star. “Marlene was the inspiration for that. She approached the Jewish Federation to help support a residential program for the developmentally disabled. She spoke to them about the need for having a Jewish organization, one that would observe kashrut – kosher – so that if there was anyone who had a

disability and needed a place to live that was kosher, that JCL would be the answer. At the time, they didn’t know of any other place in the state that had this. I think that’s what set us apart.”

Part of having good neighbors is to be one, Geary said.

“We met with them in this very room when we bought this

house 17 years ago and just told them who we were and what we were doing,” he said of those living near JCL’s third group home on West Normandy.

“We had some skeptical neighbors at the beginning, but we’ve never had an issue with any of our neighbors. In fact, the woman on this side of us works in this house, full time, so it’s very convenient; and it comes in very handy when there’s snowstorms and the staff can’t make it in. She can walk over and help hold down the fort.”

The goal is to fit in with the

neighborhood, and all the homes have done that.

Adults serviced by JCL “are highly visible in the community. It’s hard to walk around West Hartford Center and not see some of our guys on a nice day, or go to the JCC, or you go to the movie theater, or go to the mall or a restaurant – almost anywhere,” Geary said.

“One measure of our collective societal character is how we treat people in need. We have no say who we are born to or the circumstances into which we enter this world. Some people will need help all of



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The Jewish Association for Community Living has been serving clients for 36 years.



Courtesy photos

Staff and residents form a family.

their lives. JCL is a small cog in a big wheel, a small agency trying to do a big job. The families who have entrusted their adult son or daughter or sibling to our care deserve our best effort every day. We offer options not available only a few decades ago.

"I grew up in a small neighborhood. Across the street was a family of five: mom, dad and three sons. I was good friends with the youngest son, Richard. It wasn't until I was in my twenties working in this field that I learned there was a fourth son. He had a significant intellectual disability and had been living at Southbury Training School

all his life. It was a big surprise to my mother and the other parents in the neighborhood when I shared this news," he said.

JCL opened one of the first 50 or so group homes in the state in 1983.

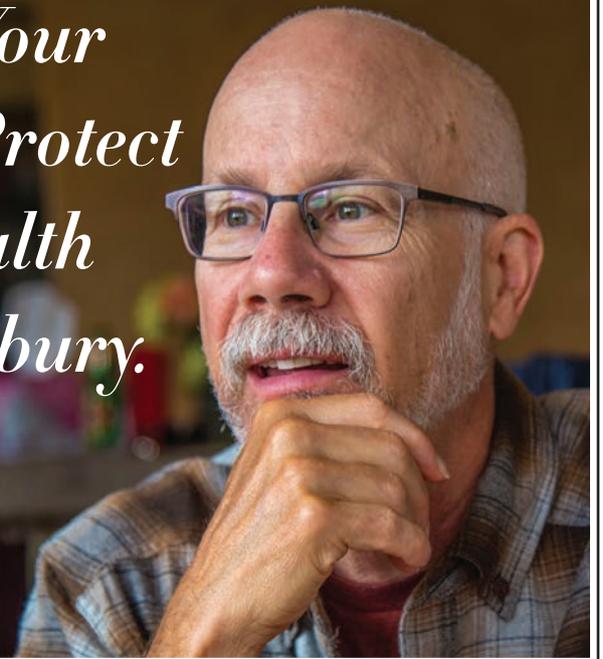
"A free public education and the hope of a life in the community as an adult were not options in the '40s and '50s for my neighbors. I never met Richard's brother. Not sure who ever did outside of his caregivers at STS.

"But I do know we have made considerable progress. JCL intends to continue making our best effort to continue that progress." **WHL**



Dean Geary (center, rear), has been overseeing programs for the Jewish Association for Community Living for 36 years.

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