

Jewish Residential Services plans expansion of successful program

David Frank is a busy man. Not only does he work nearly half time for Jewish Residential Services, but he's also actively pursuing a PhD in Learning Sciences and Policy. "Before graduate school I was a full-time employee," David explains, "and now I can't kick the JRS habit."

Jewish Residential Services provides residential and rehabilitative services to people who need support in their everyday lives because of psychiatric or developmental disabilities.

David's primary focus is working with the tenants of Charles Morris Hall, an apartment living program in Squirrel Hill serving 12 adults with intellectual disabilities. "The program has been so successful and the participants have grown so much, it's really gratifying," he said.

The success of Charles Morris Hall,

which extends beyond the capacity use of the facility to the existence of a rather extensive waiting list, has lead JRS, in collaboration with ACTION-Housing, to plan a second similar program in late 2009 or early 2010.

David remembers his earliest encounters with residents at Morris Hall. "Initially it was just a disjointed group of people," he recalls. "My first Shabbat Dinner at Morris Hall, there were two people. Now, we fill the dining room every Friday night. I think it's a great indicator of how far the community has come."

To illustrate the changes he's seen, David describes the growth of two Morris Hall tenants. The first is a young man diagnosed with a form of autism. "Initially he was very socially awkward and his anxiety level was so high that he would actually hyperventilate in

social situations," David said. "But he had a passion for art and music and he was encouraged to share them with the rest of the community. He played the piano, and got a lot of kudos for that. At his suggestion, the staff facilitated a regular art group and he got involved in creating decorations for holidays and parties. Gradually he became more socially comfortable and aware that he had something of value to contribute to the community."

The second gentleman, a middle-aged man who has been at Morris Hall for two years, lived with his elderly parents until about five years ago, when they could no longer care for him. He entered the program after a series of unsuccessful residential experiences elsewhere.

"Initially he felt very unsafe," David said. "He was frightened to go out into

the neighborhood because he had lived in so many unsafe places, and always worried he was doing something wrong and would be kicked out of his apartment. He was quite reclusive and at first and you could see him vibrating with anxiety when he interacted with other people. A lot of his adjustment was the result of staff support," David added, "but a lot came from the other tenants of the building as well."

Today the activities at Charles Morris Hall attract not only the tenants of the building, but many other people with intellectual disabilities living in the community as well.

"We had more than 50 at our last Seder," David states. "And the weekly activities attract a lot of people who have never had a peer group before. Our folks do everything now, from managing their own money to going to baseball games – usually with minimal staff involvement. I really think the program has been an incredible blessing to its participants, to their families, and to the Jewish community of Pittsburgh."

For more information on the other programs and services of JRS, visit their website, www.jrspgh.org, or call (412) 325-0039.

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