

Housing options help autistic adults find independence

April 8 2017, by Jamie Stengle



In this photo made Saturday, April 1, 2017, Clay Heighten, right, and Debra Caudy, left, embrace their autistic 19-year-old son Jon Heighten as they pose for a photo at their home in the Dallas area town of University Park, Texas. Jon Heighten's parents are helping lead a 29-acre housing development and community for autistic adults that will break ground in the coming months. (AP Photo/LM Otero)

Masha Gregory was nervous to move out of her parents' home and into her own place, where the 26-year-old Pennsylvania woman worried

about making friends and being away from her parents. But after living in her own apartment at a complex that focuses on adults with autism, she's made new friends and found she loves her independence.

"It was great to move out because I have my own life now," said Gregory, who lives in a Pittsburgh-area development where half of the 42 units are for those diagnosed with autism. "I want to be able to come and go as I please," said Gregory, who likes to draw and take photographs.

The complex, called the Dave Wright Apartments, opened in December and is among innovative housing developments popping up across the U.S. to serve those who were diagnosed with autism as children amid increased awareness about the disorder and changes in how it's defined. The developments are often spearheaded by parents who see their adult children's desire for independence and wonder who will care for them in the future.

According to the A.J. Drexel Autism Institute, 87 percent of adults with autism live with their parents at some point between high school and their early 20s—a far higher percentage than the general population.

"They want to live independently and they want to work. They want to be involved. Right now there are just not enough opportunities for them to do those things," said Debra Caudy, who is working with her husband on a housing development near Dallas inspired by their 19-year-old autistic son, Jon.



Masha Gregory, an accomplished photographer and artist who is autistic takes a polaroid photo in the recreation room at her apartment complex in Heidelberg, Pa., Thursday, March 30, 2017. Innovative housing developments like this are popping up across the U.S. to serve those who were diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder as children amid increased awareness about the disorder and changes in how it's defined. (Photo/Gene J. Puskar)

Gregory's mother, Connie, said her daughter is "thriving" in her new home.

"I think she realizes that she fits in," Gregory said. "I don't know that she would feel as secure anywhere else."

Masha Gregory describes herself as having a "little bit of autism," along with auditory processing disorder, meaning her ears and brain don't function well together.

Autism impairs one's ability to communicate and interact with others, but there can be a wide range to the symptoms and severity of the disorder. Symptoms could include not speaking, repeating certain behaviors and not wanting change in daily activities. Some people with autism have signs of lower than normal intelligence, but others have normal to high intelligence.



Elliot Frank, right, the president of Autism Housing Development Corporation of Pittsburgh, and Alexis Reighard, a personal aide to a resident at the David Wright apartments, share a laugh during a tour of the apartment complex in Heidelberg, Pa., Thursday, March 30, 2017. Innovative housing developments like this are popping up across the U.S. to serve those who were diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder as children amid increased awareness about the disorder and changes in how it's defined. (Photo/Gene J. Puskar)

The new crop of developments to accommodate autistic adults is varied.

Some are in big cities, others in small towns. Some are like the complex where Gregory has an apartment to herself. Others have homes with shared living areas and private bedrooms and bathrooms. Some just have a person on staff who can offer guidance to residents, while others offer an array of supportive services.

"What works for one person doesn't necessarily work for the other," said Carolyn Klebanoff, a co-founder of Sweetwater Spectrum, a [development](#) featuring four shared homes in Sonoma, California. "Having a whole variety of options out there is critical."

Sweetwater, which opened in 2013, is within walking distance of the town square. It has a community center, farm, greenhouse and pool. The homes have noise-dampening ceilings and quiet heating and [air conditioning systems](#) for residents who are hypersensitive to loud sounds. Residents include those like Klebanoff's 23-year-old daughter who aren't conversational, as well people with high-functioning autism.

"It's more like just a place to live," said 24-year-old Sweetwater resident Gwen Fisher, while adding that she appreciates its focus on people with autism.



Ann Rohrich, who is not autistic, stands in the living room in the David Wright apartment complex in Heidelberg, Pa., Thursday, March 30, 2017. Innovative housing developments like this are popping up across the U.S. to serve those who were diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder as children amid increased awareness about the disorder and changes in how it's defined. (Photo/Gene J. Puskar)

Fisher said she participates in activities offered at Sweetwater but also gets out into the community, including working as a dog walker and volunteering at a food bank and animal shelter.

Desiree Kameka, director of community engagement and the housing network at Madison House Autism Foundation in Maryland, said such developments can provide more freedom than group homes, where housing is typically tied to a specific provider of support services.

"It gives the people that live there the most flexibility and control," she

said, adding that sometimes group home residents end up being required to all do the same outside activities.

Many people with [autism](#) don't qualify for government services once they leave school, she noted, and these developments may help bridge the gap, providing enough support that they can live on their own.



Ann Rohrich, left, and husband Richard Rohrich, right, who are not autistic, visit with Elliot Frank, second from right, the president of Autism Housing Development Corporation of Pittsburgh, and fellow residents, Elise Mote, center, and Masha Gregory, second from right, in the recreation room at their apartment in Heidelberg, Pa., Thursday, March 30, 2017. Innovative housing developments like this are popping up across the U.S. to serve those who were diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder as children amid increased awareness about the disorder and changes in how it's defined. (Photo/Gene J. Puskar)

"Some of these communities could give people opportunities that they otherwise wouldn't have: They'd be forced to live with family," she said.

Elliot Frank, president of the nonprofit Autism Housing Development Corporation of Pittsburgh, which was behind the Dave Wright Apartments where Masha Gregory lives, has watched as a community has formed there. Frank said he came up with the concept after hearing a businessman talk about employing [autistic adults](#) and wondering where they would live.

"The whole concept of what we call disability housing, it's not what we used to think about," Frank said.



Elliot Frank, right, the president of Autism Housing Development Corporation of Pittsburgh, visits with Alexis Reighard, a personal aide to an autistic resident at the David Wright apartments in Heidelberg, Pa., Thursday, March 30, 2017. Innovative housing developments like this are popping up across the U.S. to serve those who were diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder as children amid

increased awareness about the disorder and changes in how it's defined. (Photo/Gene J. Puskar)



Ann Rohrich, left, who is not autistic, talks with Housing Coordinator Caitlin McMaster, right, and fellow resident Masha Gregory in her apartment at the David Wright apartment complex in Heidelberg, Pa., Thursday, March 30, 2017. Innovative housing developments like this are popping up across the U.S. to serve those who were diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder as children amid increased awareness about the disorder and changes in how it's defined. (Photo/Gene J. Puskar)



Elise Mote, right, hugs Alexis Reighard, and personal aide to a resident, hug during an elevator ride during a tour of the David Wright apartment complex in Heidelberg, Pa., Thursday, March 30, 2017. Innovative housing developments like this are popping up across the U.S. to serve those who were diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder as children amid increased awareness about the disorder and changes in how it's defined. (Photo/Gene J. Puskar)



Masha Gregory, center, takes a polaroid photo of fellow resident Elise Mote, left, as Richard Rohrich, who is not autistic, looks on in the recreation room at their apartment complex in Heidelberg, Pa., Thursday, March 30, 2017. Innovative housing developments like this are popping up across the U.S. to serve those who were diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder as children amid increased awareness about the disorder and changes in how it's defined. (Photo/Gene J. Puskar)



Masha Gregory, an accomplished photographer and artist who is autistic, gives a tour of her apartment in the David Wright apartment complex in Heidelberg, Pa., Thursday, March 30, 2017. Innovative housing developments like this are popping up across the U.S. to serve those who were diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder as children amid increased awareness about the disorder and changes in how it's defined. (Photo/Gene J. Puskar)(Photo/Gene J. Puskar)



This is the David Wright apartment complex in Heidelberg, Pa., near Pittsburgh, on Thursday, March 30, 2017, where half of the units are for those diagnosed with autism. Innovative housing developments like this are popping up across the U.S. to serve those who were diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder as children amid increased awareness about the disorder and changes in how it's defined. (Photo/Gene J. Puskar)



In this photo made Saturday, April 1, 2017, Jon Heighten get ready to eat a slice of pizza as his family's home in the Dallas area town of University Park, Texas. Heighten's parents are helping lead a planned a 29-acre housing development and community for autistic adults that will break ground in the coming months. (AP Photo/LM Otero)



In this photo made Saturday, April 1, 2017, Clay Heighen, right, gets a hug from his 19-year-old son Jon Heighen at their home in the Dallas area town of University Park, Texas. Jon Heighen's parents are helping lead a planned a 29-acre housing development and community for autistic adults that will break ground in the coming months. (AP Photo/LM Otero)

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