

Growing up, not giving up



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Samantha Ferri, 19, wants her independence the way a mother wants what's best for her child: with all her heart and soul.

"Everyone should have the chance to try living on their own," she says.

"I want to be treated like an adult. I'm not 5 years old."

Her mother, Wendy Potter, wants her daughter to be independent as well. But when your child has special needs, independence is not always best. Already, it's almost an act of faith allowing Samantha to ride the Laguna Beach trolley alone.

At age 22, children step off the escalator of special needs education. They can stumble if their parents aren't planning the next steps.

How do you give such adults a shot at full social lives and a semblance of independence when they still need protection? Who will take care of them when their parents are gone?

For a group of Orange County parents, the answer is to create a place for it to happen.

They have the vision and they already bought the building. Now they're on a mission to raise a few dollars more to open the doors at Glennwood.

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Trevor Larson, 29, who has Down syndrome poses with his father Randy Larson at the Glennwood facility in Laguna Beach on Thursday, December 1, 2011. Randy Larson started the Glennwood Housing Foundation in 2009 to provide housing for young adults ages 18-45 with developmental disabilities. They raised money to buy a former assisting living facility and are now raising \$3.4 million to transform it into a place where about 50 adults with developmental disabilities can live. The idea is to not just give them a place to live but a social life to go with it. They want Glennwood House to offer job placement, life skills, plus social and physical activities.

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Samantha was born with Williams Syndrome, a rare genetic disorder that pairs her outgoing and trusting personality with learning disabilities.

"I have a deletion of the seventh chromosome," she offers matter-of-factly. "I don't want a baby sitter. Maybe the lower-functioning kids need more help. I'm high functioning."

Samantha graduated from Laguna Beach High School in 2010. She attends a four-year transition program teaching her life skills such as grocery shopping, banking and laundry. She organizes stock at TJ Maxx for the work experience.

Her mother worries about Samantha's future. She doesn't want her daughter in the sort of group home where collecting her payment is more important than looking after her child.

Donna Brown from Aliso Viejo also worries about her son Taylor, 20, who has autism. He, too, attends a transition program and takes PE at Saddleback College.

His younger sister will be going away to college, but where will Taylor go after he turns 22?

Brown started worrying with the diagnosis.

"You can't help but think: Who is going to take care of him? We only have about another year ... and then what happens?"

Regional centers help coordinate services, but she notes that as these young adults transition out of the educational system it can be the end of their routines, their friendships and their social lives.

Concern for his son's social life initially prompted Laguna Niguel father Randy Larson to take action. Trevor, 28, has Down syndrome, and as a child he wanted to play sports.

Larson began by coaching teams for special needs kids. In 2003 he created a program, the Lighthouse Group, to provide a social outlet for these players who had grown into young adults. Activities that started with Starbucks and movies now include a weeklong summer camp and a winter ski camp.

Trevor, T-Rod to his friends, is a floor hockey standout in the Special Olympics. He has a paid, part-time job doing maintenance and stock work at Sears. Too easy, he scoffs.

His dad notes: You want to create an environment in which the highlight of the day is more than watching TV and playing with the dog.

For special needs children, the logistics of having a social life are more complex than planning play dates.

"These kids did not go to birthday parties; they did not go to sleepovers," explains Samantha's mother. "Many of these children did not have relationships ... I want her to have an opportunity to develop lifetime friendships."

Each year Larson surveys parents in the group on their priorities. A few years ago, the response shifted from the daily social needs of their children to worries about their long-term futures. Where will these children safely live out their lives? What kind of future can we promise?

"They need exposure to the rest of the world. They see their siblings leave home and they want to have community," Larson says.

"They want to be hugged, just like the rest of us."

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When Larson began to look, he didn't like most of the existing places he found for Trevor to live. Most housing programs serve a handful of disabled adults in small houses. So three years ago he began looking for a place to buy.

He started the nonprofit Glennwood Housing Foundation in 2009 with other parents looking for safe and affordable housing for their children. They raised enough money to close escrow in October of 2010 on a vacant assisted living facility in south Laguna Beach.

The foundation, which has been embraced by the Laguna community, now needs to raise \$900,000 to renovate the building. They hope to start construction at the end of February.

Here's the vision: a co-ed home for 50 young, developmentally disabled adults. The home would provide everything they need to thrive in one safe place. The staff will include health care and social workers.

These parents are ready to let their children go even while they continue to hold on tight. They are hoping to open the doors this summer.

It seems fitting that a facility originally designed for the end of life could be recycled into a home for those whose lives are getting started.

Donna Brown explains that for her son, Taylor, having a peer group means everything.

"His whole world could be so full."

Samantha's mother adds: "A lot of these adult kids have the same wants and needs as other young adults. They understand a lot more than you think."

They understand that growing up means moving on. And they understand that, so far, it isn't happening for them.

Samantha speaks for herself:

"Some people don't understand how we feel. We're regular people like everybody else... Glennwood is a place I could live on my own."

We finish talking. Some people mutter good-bye, but Samantha gives me a hug. It leaves a more lasting impression.

Read more about [Glennwood Housing Foundation](#)

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