



AGENCY OF THE MONTH: INNOVATIVE RESOURCES FOR INDEPENDENCE

By MICHELLE ARNOT

In July of 2015, when New York City introduced its long overdue Disability Pride Parade to mark the 25th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act, among those marching were representatives of two award-winning Queens nonprofits: Independence Residences Inc. and Queens Parent Resource Center (QPRC).

Effective July 1, 2016, Independence Residences and QPRC formally merged, and marched in this year's parade under the name IRI: Innovative Resources for Independence.

Established by parents concerned about care for their children, both agencies had been serving the community for decades. Since 2012 the two nonprofits have combined their efforts, resources and programs to ensure the broadest array of individualized supports are available to better assist the about 1,600 adults and children with intellectual or developmental disabilities that they serve. Most are referred by families, or upon repatriation from out-of-state education programs at age 21. Now, with a joint budget of about \$35 million and a staff of about 500 direct support plus 250 management and clinical staff, IRI intends to extend its reach beyond the Bronx, Queens, Brooklyn and Long Island to coincide with its recently developed five-year plan. As part of the rebranding, IRI has also added a tagline: "empowering choice, creating opportunities."

"Drawing the analogy to a relationship between consenting adults, you could say that (Independence Residences) and QPRC got engaged, and have formally tied the knot," said IRI Executive Director Raymond J. DeNatale, a longtime advocate for people on the autism spectrum. He is also a member of the board of directors of the Interagency Council, Advance of Greater New York and the Advance Care Alliance. "After completing an 18-month strategic portfolio, we have identified our growth areas and are prepared internally for known external changes, including the increase in minimum wage, federal Department of Labor changes, and the transformation of the field of developmental disabilities ultimately leading to managed care," said DeNatale.

According to Lindsay Brienza, the agency's development and fundraising coordinator, IRI has positioned itself on numerous statewide committees to help shape and better understand the impact of impending regulatory changes. "For example, as a member of the Value-Based Payment committee, we know that agencies will be paid based on the

quality of their service, not just the volume," she said. "Since IRI delivers its services based on the specific wants, needs and capabilities of our individuals and measures the success of those services based on meeting outcomes data, we are already operating under some of the parameters of managed care."

IRI serves those seeking housing and employment options, services in the home, crisis services, and many other immediate services. "People's lives need to be enriched quickly, and we are tuned in to that urgency," said DeNatale. Its goal is to empower each individual with (intellectual or developmental disabilities) to lead the selection of his or her housing, find employment and create relationships in the community and be in good health. "Our operating principle as an organization is based on working as a team to improve the quality of life of the people we support," he added. "As the saying goes: Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach him to fish and he eats for life." IRI is recognized by the Office for People With Developmental Disabilities as a Tier II COMPASS agency (Consumerism Outcome Management Plan and Agency Self Survey) for its commitment to quality service and its track record as a leader in the field of developmental disabilities.

In its effort to enable independence, IRI strives to mainstream its clients when possible. "If people say they want to live differently, whether it's with a family member, a roommate or even a staff member, we listen very closely and strive to fulfill that request," said DeNatale. "The definition of what is home to each

person is crucial. Providing the kind of home to which each individual aspires is a key element to our model."

IRI is positioning itself at the forefront of designing customized solutions for its clients' needs. In the past, DeNatale recounted, people with disabilities were housed in insane asylums, until the state eventually moved them into developmental centers. In the late 1980s, care improved vastly when group homes were introduced. At present, the field is recognizing that a "one size fits all" concept of group living does not work, and to do so would be fiscally unsustainable. IRI offers an array of residential options – ranging from supervised group situations to home ownership. "Of the men and women who lived in our residences in 2012, over 20 percent have moved into living arrangements with three or less people created to meet their individual likes and capacities," DeNatale said.

DeNatale attributes IRI's success in large part to its dedicated direct-support professional staff and experienced, innovative leadership team. The latest addition to IRI's team is John McGuigan, its associate executive director for program operations and quality improvement, who has over 20 years' experience supporting people with developmental disabilities and values, such as person-first thinking, that align with the field's efforts to empower choice by clients.

Additionally, IRI is constantly working to incorporate improvements in technology that support independence and allow staff to meet specific needs. Through a combination of sensor and telehealth technology, IRI can ensure a safe envi-

ronment in a non-intrusive way and still be alerted when a check-in with a client is necessary. Staff can use this technology to monitor things like cooking practices, unusual opening of outside doors or failure to take medication from a "connected" dispenser. A staff member can also be in video contact with a nurse and use an array of biometric devices to remotely take a person's vitals and better triage the need for further medical attention. With these telehealth developments, IRI has averted many disruptive and costly visits to the emergency room.

DeNatale cites direct-support professional staff turnover as a big hurdle, especially in light of the increasing minimum wage in New York State. "Even if we could match the pay of, say, McDonald's, there's no doubt that our work is more complex than slinging burgers," he said. "Working at IRI is not just about making a living but about having compassion for your fellow New Yorkers."

DeNatale foresees additional collaborations for IRI with other agencies that share similar missions. "The key is to be large enough to invest in new business lines or strategies while being nimble enough to meet individual needs as they come up," he said. "Key to such collaborations is that each (executive director) and their organization's board has to be prepared to leave our egos at the door in order to recognize which agency brings the best asset to the collaboration in order to best assist the people we support." ●



Andrew (left) and staff member James enjoy doing arts and crafts together in the Day Habilitation program at IRI.