

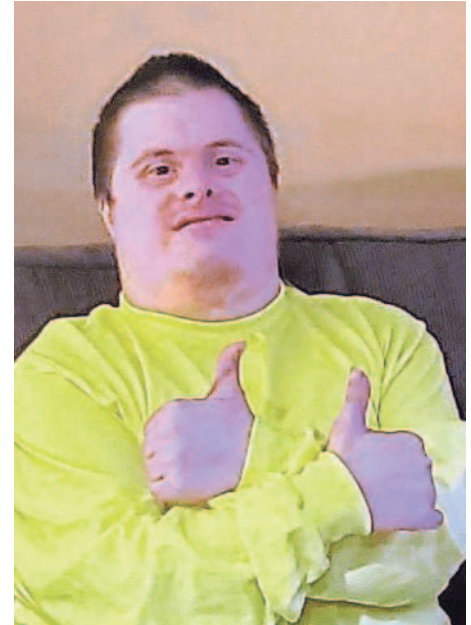
OUR PLACE OFFERS INDEPENDENT LIVING



Sam Cousins, of Stratham, hopes to be a resident of Our Place when the project to build a home for adults with intellectual developmental disabilities becomes reality. PROVIDED PHOTOS



Andrew Long, 29, of Alton, who is a comedian, believes living at Our Place would allow his parents to worry less about his future.



Peter Zoellick, 33, of South Hampton, believes moving to Our Place, a home envisioned for adults with intellectual developmental disabilities, would be best for his future.

Nonprofit to build Seacoast home for adults with disabilities

Karen Dandurant

Foster's Daily Democrat | USA TODAY NETWORK

DOVER — Our Place is looking for their place, a permanent home for adults with intellectual developmental disabilities in the greater Seacoast who have aged out of support available for children.

"I want to live at Our Place because I want to be independent and live with my friends," Sam Cousins said. "We can talk, play games and watch TV and eat dinner!"

Cousins, who is 30, lives with her parents in Stratham. The Our Place nonprofit organization is working hard to provide the home she and her friends want, and to give parents confidence their adult children with disabilities have a safe home and a bright future.

Founded in 2019, Our Place has

raised nearly \$300,000, reaching the point where it is looking for land to build a home, according to Laurie McIntosh, its executive director.

Andrew Long of Alton also wants to see Our Place succeed.

"I'm 29 years old, almost 30 in June, and just want to have a place to call my own, like anyone else would at my age," Long said. "I can't do it on my own, I need people there to help me be safe and a part of the community, to help me get to my job. I volunteer at the Cocheco Valley humane society, I give back. Don't I deserve a chance, too? Our Place seems like it might be my chance."

Long said sometimes he feels like a burden to his family.

"I cannot do everything on my own, go anywhere on my own. Even though they don't want me to feel that way, I can't help it. I'm hoping Our Place might

be just the thing to give all of us some hope ... and an apartment that lets me not feel like a burden and be like everyone else," he said. "What's going to happen to me when my family isn't here anymore or are too old to help me? I feel bad saying that, but it is true. It feels scary. Especially because with a little help, I can do it. Mom and Dad can feel less afraid. Our Place gives us all hope."

Long is a comedian and said he has done many shows, some for hundreds of people at a time.

"Governor Sununu's wife invited me to perform for a state event this past summer," Long said. "I work. I volunteer. I ski. I like kayaking. I have a girlfriend. I want what most people want, to have a place to call their own. I just need a little help."

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Our Place

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"I want my own place. I'm too old to live with my mom," said Peter Zoellick, 33, of South Hampton.

Why Seacoast parents felt urgency to start Our Place

McIntosh said Our Place has made a lot of progress since a group of parents got together in 2019 to try to find housing for their adult children. They discovered New Hampshire did not have a plan for all the adults with intellectual developmental disabilities (IDD) who were living with their parents.

"When COVID struck, and people over 65 were getting very sick, these parents were reminded of their mortality and the fact that they needed to find secure, supportive housing for their adult children," McIntosh said. "Most of these adults with IDD have attended public schools and along with academics, learned social skills as well as daily living and vocational skills. These are adults living in our community who require housing just as much as anyone else. However, their income levels make it difficult for them to afford market-rate housing."

The parents created Our Place. Its board of directors looked around the state and found only a few places where people with IDD could find supportive housing and live with or near their peers. One of these, Visions for Creative Housing Solutions, in Enfield, became the model they decided to try to replicate on the Seacoast.

"We are doing this so our people have support to live as independently as possible, with overnight support," McIntosh said. "Ideally, there will be transportation to their jobs and we can provide assistance with their activities of daily living, like meals."



The Our Place board, from left, Leigh Rohde, Amy Ferris, Mike Bennett, Laurie McIntosh (executive director), Janette Desmond, Maria Cousins has raised nearly \$300,000 toward creating a home for adults with intellectual developmental disabilities. PROVIDED

What is the vision for Our Place?

Luckily, McIntosh said, Visions of Enfield had a written toolkit the Our Place parents could use as a model for their first project. The model is not a group home or mini-institution. Ten tenants would have their own apartments with one or two people and be integrated into the community with jobs and recreational activities suited to their skills and interests.

"It is like a family," McIntosh said. "We like that there is someone there 24/7 just in case someone needs help."

Our Place is envisioned to have a common kitchen, dining and living room. It could be in one building or multiple smaller buildings, and located near public transportation or offer parking for staff cars and a van. Being located near a downtown area would be a plus so residents could walk to jobs or recreational activities. The project is planned to be financed with a capital campaign and grant funding.

Our Place also has a vision for a second housing project, teaming up with Regan Development of New York. The vision, McIntosh said, is for Regan to build affordable housing with 40 units on 3-6 acres of property, including 10 of the units for adults with developmental disabilities scattered across the building. There would be an office area for

staff and a community room for activities to be used by all tenants. Regan would finance this project, she said.

Where Our Place stands financially

Our Place worked to become a 501(c)(3) nonprofit and participated in the NH Gives online fundraiser annually since 2020, raising \$120,000, according to McIntosh. In 2022, it hosted the first Our Place comedy show at The Brook casino in Seabrook, raising more than \$74,000 between the event itself and 35% of the gaming proceeds from that week at The Brook, she said.

Our Place's total fundraising has reached \$290,000, she said, and the organization is ready to move into Phase 2 of its project, which is property development. It assembled a group of volunteers to look for property in the Seacoast area to build a home for 10 adults with IDD. Meanwhile, McIntosh said, Our Place is also working with Regan Development on the 40-unit project, which would feature affordable housing units.

"This project would include an office for staff and a community room for all building tenants where facilitation of inclusive activities could take place," she said.

She noted Visions received donated land for its latest project.

"We can't expect someone to give us

property, but we would love it if we could find property before it goes on the market," she said. "That way, we could run our capital campaign during a period of site control before purchasing."

Alternative solutions for young adults with IDD present challenges

McIntosh said some families have experience settling their loved ones in apartments in the Seacoast area and arranging for them to have support services through an agency.

"However, this model has its problems," she said. "Recently, with staff shortages, people have been left alone for days at a time and loneliness causes them to be depressed. The lack of overnight support means that the only option for some people is to call 911 if they have a problem such as a fall or they become ill. Another model is called Enhanced Family Care, which is like adult foster care. This model suffers from poor oversight and caregivers who often decide to give it up after a short time."

McIntosh said many adults with IDD don't need constant supervision. They want to live on their own, but it helps to have someone checking in to make sure they are on schedule and able to complete necessary tasks. With the model Our Place envisions, staff can help several people at once. For instance, said McIntosh, one staff person can help several people get ready for work in the morning, each in their own apartment, which is much more economical. Tenants can enjoy group recreational activities and go to the grocery store together.

How to help

Donations for Our Place are being accepted through the donate button at ourplacenh.org. For information, call 603-617-6900 or email info@ourplacenh.org.