



NEWS

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Unity House Consumer Matt Evener Flourishes in Auburn Day Hab Structure

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Pennysaver Super Carrier and
Day Hab consumer Matt Evener

AUBURN – For Unity House consumer Matt Evener, the structured routine established and maintained via the agency’s Auburn Day Habilitation (day hab) program in which he participates has been and is key to his continuous growth and independence.

“When Matt came to us in 2003, we designed a formal structure of activity and routine that would help stabilize his autism and that also would fully meet his desires and needs,” says Tim Clancy, Matt’s long-time day hab Community Integration Specialist who also started working in the program in 2003 shortly before Matt was enrolled in it. “With a structure of daily activity that’s aligned with his desires and needs and that emphasizes community participation, and by consistently sticking to it, Matt has benefited greatly. He’s way, way more independent now because of a routine that affords him lots of community interaction and experiences.”

A 31 year-old Auburnian who lives with his mother, Charlene Powers, and her husband, Tom, and their great niece, Alexis Fillingham, Matt’s journey to stability and independence since he was diagnosed with autism when he was just over five years old has been filled with the emotional roller coaster of ups and downs most individuals with developmental disabilities and their families go through. For Matt and Charlene and Tom and their family, the ‘trip’ has been worth it.

“At the time we learned about Matt’s disability, I was living in the Moravia school district and Matt was enrolled in it,” says Charlene, who has learned the ‘ins and outs’ of the human service industry and developed relationships with several parents of individuals with developmental disabilities from her growing experiences in the field. “He was first sent to a Skaneateles disability program that just didn’t work out for him, it was an inappropriate setting for him. For the next year, from 1983-1984, I struggled to find the right school and care setting for him. We’d moved to Jordan-Elbridge in that time period, and by then, I was at wit’s end. In trying to get him what he needed in that district, I knew it was pretty much the last house on the block for him and me. Thank God for Paul Hurst, the principal at the school he was enrolling in, who said the school would take him in and work with him despite them knowing little if any thing about autism.”

Matt started there in December 1984, and also was sent to Syracuse’s Jawonio School, which serves children and adolescents with disabilities and special needs, for two weeks each year. Charlene says she cannot say enough about how the Jordan-Elbridge district helped Matt adjust in the classroom.

“The district had a one-on-one aide and Matt also had access to a speech therapist and a physical therapist and a resource room teacher,” she recalls. “They were all wonderful professionals who played a big role in Matt’s progress to later grades and eventual graduation from Skaneateles High School in 1997.”

Charlene points out that as Matt aged his needs and desires likewise grew and that she and her family realized they were limited in what they could provide Matt at home. They began accessing community services for him that were external to what the school systems offered, first at the Cayuga Home for Children in Auburn and then at the E. John Gavras Center day hab

program, also in Auburn. She enrolled Matt in Unity House's day hab program and services after hearing about it from the mother of one of the agency's MRDD residential consumers and a member of the community's Family Reimbursement Committee, now a component of Family Support Services.

"We're really happy about his progress in Unity House's day hab program,' she smiles. "Tim Clancy has been just unbelievable with him, he has such great faith in Matt. His and the other staff's ability to adjust to Matt's needs within the schedule and routine they have going with him is so important. Matt thinks the world of Tim."

Underlining the dedication and commitment Clancy has towards her son's welfare, Charlene tells the story of how about two years ago she and her family became violently ill with the flu, such that she and other family members were incapacitated and needed help with Matt. She says she called Clancy on a Sunday – "His day off!" she exclaims – and asked if he could come over and work with Matt. She says not only did Clancy readily appear and help with Matt shortly after being asked, he also helped clean up their home and even washed Matt's clothes that day.

"We tried to pay him but he refused to take any thing," she says. "All he said was, 'What are friends for?' What he did spoke volumes about him as a person and his value to Matt each day at the day hab program."

Clancy, who has attended trainings to learn about autism and how to work with individuals with it, emphasizes that for the three days he now works with Matt (Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays) and the three days two other CIS staff, Phil Dutton (Wednesdays and Fridays) and Lee Pongpipat* (Saturdays) are with him, their structured routine has to remain somewhat

flexible. He also praises Charlene's diligence working with Matt at the end of his day when he heads home to be with his family.

“Our structure for Matt demands several things but has to be flexible enough to include off-routine needs and desires,” he says. “We are always informing and explaining things to Matt throughout his day with us, so he'll know what he's doing and going to do. The fact that Charlene a lot of the time also reviews with him what his next day will include helps us a lot with that all-important continuity.”

Matt's current structure encompasses delivering trays of food to Meals-On-Wheels clientele and bowling on Tuesdays; swimming and other water activities on Thursdays and Saturdays at the Auburn YMCA (“Matt loves the water and its sensory stimulation benefits,” Clancy says); walking exercise at the Y's track on Fridays; and playing Bingo every other month. In addition, he has gained considerable employment experience in the community, including having worked at Welch-Allyn corporation, a Skaneateles, NY-based global manufacturer and marketer of medical instruments and related products and services, and setting up and replenishing boxes of lollipops at various Unity House program and service sites in Auburn.

Matt's current job has him delivering about 150 Auburn *Pennysavers* every Thursday afternoon. His commitment and performance carrying the weekly paper earned him the October 2008 Auburn *Pennysaver* Carrier Excellence Award from its publisher, the Scotsman Press.

“We awarded Matt because we simply had to recognize how good a job he does delivering our papers,” says Scotsman Press circulation coordinator Veronica Haag. “We get zero complaints from all the *Pennysaver* customers he delivers to, he always delivers on time, and he just does an excellent job. He deserved that award, plain and simple.”

Ron Krause, Matt's job coach via Unity House's Auburn Employment Services site, helps Matt on his delivery route, which takes him about three hours to complete.

"From a little after two o'clock each Thursday afternoon to a little before three, we sleeve all the papers and then head out to deliver them," he says. "He does a fabulous job, he's progressed really, really well. He does all of Arch Street, part of Fitch Street, and also houses on Garrow Street, Park Place, and Wood Street. That latter street has about 15 houses that he does all by himself now, after he checks with me about how many to leave at the houses and where to place them. His route also has him doing some homes on Genesee Street. He looks forward to it so much."

What's next for Matt?

"We'd love to have him buy and live in his own home, with the necessary 24/7 support, maybe a day roommate and overnight help" says Charlene of Matt, who spends much of each Sunday in Auburn with his father, Alan Evener (Matt also remains connected to his 29-year-old brother who's married with three children and serving in the Air Force in Alaska, and to two half-sisters in Auburn and a half-sister in Hamilton, N.Y.). "We're looking forward to Matt buying his own home, through a program called HOYO. It'd be great for him and us. Until then, he'll keep attending Unity House's day hab and continue to reap those benefits. He really has come a long way, and we're beyond thankful for where he's at."

**NOTE: Pongpipat, a native of Thailand, had been Matt's CIS on Saturdays until the end of January 2009, when he left Unity House to return to his native land to care for his ailing grandmother. "Lee was great at getting Matt out to Wegman's into on Saturdays and the rest of the community," says Charlene. "He taught Matt to order his own coffee and they would walk the whole store together, to interact with employees and customers. He also got him to go to places like the River Bend coffee shop and café. Matt and our family are going to miss Lee a lot."*