

Community Haven Aims To Serve More Disabled Adults



Marla Doss, president and CEO of the Community Haven, chats with Megan Maus about some of the trips Maus has been on with the vacation group at the Community Haven.

STAFF PHOTO / RACHEL O'HARA

By [Ian Cummings](#)

Published: Thursday, December 25, 2014 at 5:47 p.m

SARASOTA - Denise Griffin worries about what will happen if her son Matthew outlives her. It is the opposite of what most parents fear, but common among those whose children were born with developmental disabilities.

Griffin's son, Matthew, is 26 and cannot read or write. He may never be independent. For the past several years, he has spent his days at Community Haven for Adults and Children with Disabilities Inc., in Sarasota, a 32-acre campus for people with mental and physical disabilities.

Soon, Griffin hopes, Matthew will move into a new home here. The Community Haven, with a new rezoning approved by Sarasota County, is beginning a major expansion and plans to break ground on a new group home in February.

“It just provides a safe, happy place for him,” Griffin said. In addition to education, many of the residents earn wages, employed doing industrial piece work tasks under contract through the nonprofit Community Haven.

“Selfishly, I want to keep him at home and keep him safe but realistically, at age 50 is not the time for him to come out into the world.”

Some residents have lived at Community Haven for decades. Rooms here are much in demand among parents such as Griffin, who seek a sustainable future for the first generation of developmentally disabled children who will outlive their parents. The new expansion would, over the next 10 years, build new homes and work space for full-time residents at Community Haven, which is always filled to capacity and maintains a waiting list, said Marla Doss, CEO of Community Haven.

Across the state 23,000 people are on waiting lists for places like Community Haven. Meanwhile, people with disabilities are particularly vulnerable to unemployment and twice as likely to suffer from poverty than are people without disabilities, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

“So shame on us,” Doss said, meaning Florida in general. “But we are maxed out.”

Doss is hoping to change that and open up more space and employment opportunities here. An array of schools, group homes, and industrial buildings spread over the Community Haven’s property serve people of all ages, from infants to the elderly. The Selby Preschool enrolls as many as 40 children, while the Selby School teaches kindergarten and grades 9-12.

Dozens of adults live in the campus’ several unique group homes, while more than 140 visit daily to work at manufacturing gift bags for luxury car dealerships or processing honey for a local beekeeping operation.

In the next five years, the Community Haven is planning to build a new industrial building and a group home called Marlene’s House, which is named after a donor’s daughter and would house eight adults.

Further out, three more group homes, a new preschool, new offices, a senior center and a recreation building are on the drawing board. The Community Haven is still fundraising for some of those projects, and is always seeking volunteers.

For more information, visit communityhaven.org.