

On Father's Day, Flemington man treasures adult son's independence

By **Hunterdon County Democrat**

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FLEMINGTON — For Larry Cartwright, Father's Day has special meaning. His youngest son of four children, Mark, now 38 years old, was diagnosed with schizophrenia and epilepsy, and was 22 when he started working with Easter Seals NJ.

The nonprofit organization assists families affected by special needs by providing opportunities to live, learn to live, learn, work and play in their communities, with equality, dignity and independence.

After working with the program for 11 years, Mark became entirely independent, making his dad proud to be a father.

Initially Mark entered the Flemington residential program where his Easter Seals case worker would come once a week to take him out into the community to help develop his social skills. After starting out in a 24-hour house, he eventually transitioned into a 12-hour residence where he learned life skills such as cooking, chores and the like. Mark was in the residential program and lived in several houses where he worked with an Easter Seals case worker weekly.

"All of Mark's Easter Seals case workers — the people that moved with him and the Flemington house workers — were amazing. They went the extra mile," said Larry. "They all made the experience for Mark excellent. He would not be where he is today without Easter Seals. He is living life to the fullest."

Over time, Mark was able to move out and into his own apartment, only receiving intensive case management services from Easter Seals.

Larry continued, "Today Mark is very sociable and confident in himself. He is entirely independent, lives on his own, has a job, volunteers once a week at the hospital, and is working on managing his finances. Without the help of Easter Seals NJ in our community, Mark would not be where he is today."

Being a father can entail a variety of responsibilities and Larry cannot say enough about Easter Seals. He and his wife Priscilla give the organization credit for being instrumental in getting their son Mark to where he is today by building up his social skills and self-confidence.

Mark recently began working at BJ's Wholesale Club three days a week to develop his skills by interacting with shoppers and handing out food samples. He is required to be very sociable in this position, and he is, according to Mark's boss, who is extremely satisfied with his work. Mark also volunteers at Hunterdon Medical Center one day a week, and one of his key tasks involves rotating medications.

Mark's parents said, "It is good for Mark to have structure. The doctors at Hunterdon Medical Center, where he was first diagnosed, use Mark's story as a success story, since he has made such an incredible transition to the man he has become today."

Mark said, "I loved being in the program because we did things socially that I would not have been able to do otherwise, like bowling, picnics and all."

According to Mental Health America, one in five American adults will be diagnosed with a mental health condition in any given year. Forty percent of Americans will meet the criteria for a diagnosable mental health condition, and half of those people will develop their conditions by the age of 14.

Easter Seals New Jersey is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization that has helped individuals and families with disabilities or special needs since 1948. For more information on Easter Seals New Jersey and its statewide disability services, call 732-257-6662, visit eastersealsnj.org or find Easter Seals NJ on Facebook.



Larry (left), Mark, and Priscilla

Cartwright (courtesy photo)