

# The Record

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## Intermediate-care facility a 'second family' for North Jersey son MONDAY, NOVEMBER 28, 2011

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It took Maureen and Joseph Pallatta a long time to decide that their eldest son needed to be cared for by someone else.

“Twenty-five years I had him at home,” said Maureen. “He is completely dependent. He’s 45, he’s still in diapers, he’s non-verbal, he has seizures.”



LESLIE BARBARO/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Joey Pallatta, 45, with his mother Maureen, is non-verbal and has been living at Spectrum's intermediate care facility in Closter for 20 years.

Joey developed his condition – the cause of which has never been diagnosed – when he was a toddler, and some doctors advised placing him in an institution. But that was not a possibility the Pallattas were willing to consider.

“Any time that was brought up, I’d say that’s not an option for us. I got really upset,” Maureen recalled. “Joey’s very lovable. He wants to hug you all the time.”

Scoliosis left his back at a 105-degree angle to the ground.

“He’s not real big, which was good for us,” his father said. “I lifted him for so many years. I’m the only one who can walk him. He walks with braces on his legs. I could hold him to where, if he had a seizure and his body went limp, he didn’t hit the ground. I could lower him to the ground.”

Twenty years ago, when the couple reached their late 40s, the physical demands of caring for Joey became overwhelming. Maureen, who had become an active advocate for the developmentally disabled, was on the board of Spectrum for Living, the River Vale non-profit that operates a range of residences and day programs.

The group’s co-founder, the late Alex Gallione, pressed the Pallattas to think about placing their son in Spectrum’s intermediate care facility in Closter, a residence for developmentally disabled adults with severe medical problems.

“You deserve to have a life too, Alex told me. I said, ‘Don’t tell me that. We’re doing fine,’ ” Maureen said. But in fact, they weren’t. Though still small for his age, Joey, then in his 20s, had become too heavy for her to lift.

“I worked over 50 hours a week, so I wasn’t there,” Joseph Pallatta explained. “So she was doing a lot of this stuff by herself. She was starting to have problems with her back from picking him up constantly. Alex kept on it: ‘You’re not going to be able to do this forever. And if you wait too long, what’s going to happen to Joey?’”

Finally, they agreed to give Spectrum a try. That was 20 years ago, and it’s a decision the Pallattas have never regretted.

“These people, they know him, probably better than we do,” Maureen Pallata said of the Spectrum staff, whom she describes as a second family for her son. On one occasion Joey had a seizure and injured himself when he fell. “They were there at the hospital with him. One of the girls is in the room with tears in her eyes. She’s crying that Joey got hurt.”

Living in Old Tappan, just three miles from their son, the Pallattas visit him regularly. Most of the time, Joseph added, he’s smiling and happy. “You’ve got people working and they’re making minimum pay, but most of them are caring people.”

“My younger son, Michael, has become sort of Joey’s guardian,” Maureen said. “He would go over there and just observe what was going on. The best moment for me was when he came into the kitchen one day and he said, ‘You and Dad made the best decision for Joey. They really care about him there.’”

If there’s anything that bothers them about the Spectrum intermediate-care facility, it’s the fact that it’s the only one of its kind in the state.

More than a decade ago the state Division of Developmental Disabilities decided not to approve any more community ICFs, even though the Pallattas believe they would fill a dire need – especially as the state tries to move most of the remaining population out of its institutions for the developmentally disabled.

“Some of those people have intense needs,” Maureen said. “They could really use some more community ICFs. State officials, however, say ICFs don’t fit into their plans for a community system.



LESLIE BARBARO/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Maureen Pallatta draws smiles as she sings to her son, Joey Pallatta, right, and Danny during a visit to Spectrum intermediate care facility in Closter.

“Our intent is to support the development of small residential programs and not to increase large congregate living situations,” said Department of Human Services spokeswoman Pam Ronan. Spectrum’s Closter facility houses about 60 residents, making it too large to fit the state’s model, she added. “We have more than enough ICF capacity in the developmental centers. Our development needs are for small community homes.”

But the state does continue to refer clients who are coming out of its developmental centers or from its waiting list of people living with their families to the Spectrum ICF, Maureen Pallatta added.

It won’t allow Spectrum, however, to transfer any clients from the Closter facility to group homes that provide less intensive care, even if the staff has determined they can function well in such a residence.

“We can’t move somebody from Closter now to a state-funded group-home slot,” said Maureen Pallatta, who now sits on the ICF’s admissions committee. “Someone in Closter we felt would benefit from being in a group home, we can’t move them. The state feels they’re in the community at the ICF and that’s their placement.”

And since the state won’t let Spectrum transfer anyone out, the only way a slot opens in the Closter facility is if one of the clients dies.

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