

Facilitating Independence

As he leads the way from one beautiful sitting room to the next on the main floor of the enormous old Brookline house he shares with twelve other developmentally disabled adults, Thierry C. points out that one of the building's many incarnations was as a home for the elderly. "My parents bought me my room so that I could live here for the rest of my life," he says, stopping on the majestic main stairway, "which I guess means it's going to be an old folks home again one day." Thierry and his twelve housemates each own a condominium unit in the house. Like the others, he has a private bedroom and a share of the common space, which comprises two parlors, a television room, dining area, restaurant-sized kitchen, laundry, and several bathrooms. The bedrooms vary widely in size and decor — some are bright, vast, impeccably tidy domains; others are warm, cluttered spaces tucked up cozily in the rafters. Thierry's running commentary makes clear that each room reflects the interests and personality of its tenant.

Established fifteen years ago under the auspices of Specialized Housing, Inc., this was the first condominium in the nation for developmentally disabled adults. The first residents were young people, many of whom had lived with their families before they moved to their new home. The organization, run by David Wizansky (SSW'67) and Margot Wizansky (SSW'67), stipulated that all residents must be able to take care of their own personal needs. Of founding Specialized Housing, David says, "We felt strongly about being in a partnership with developmentally disabled adults, not a hierarchy. We wanted to help people help themselves."

The Wizanskys, who met at Boston University while earning master's

degrees, have since developed seven other condos in and around Boston. The ninth is under way. In each building, the residents own their units and are responsible for living as independently as possible. They contribute to the preparation of food and the general care of the house. A house manager at each property supervises the operation of the house, assists in its day-to-day maintenance, helps the residents manage their personal finances, and offers advice for residents dealing with situations they've never encountered before. "The residents are not all good at problem solving," says Margot. "Sometimes they need support making judgment calls."

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idea of people with disabilities being able to take care of their own needs. We facilitate the creation of communities and encourage our residents to become full citizens. We provide them with a secure and comfortable environment, which gives them the confidence to come out and be part of the larger com-



munity." In addition to working, many of the residents are active in the community. Margot provides an impressive list: some volunteer at local nursing homes, some at the library, and others sing in a church choir. They have developed friendships with the people who run the neighborhood coffee shop, and they know to turn to the owner of the hardware store on the corner should they need assistance while they're out.

Most central, however, are the relationships they form with one another. "In each house there's a real credo of everyone being in it together," says David. "The residents remind each other what they need to do that day; they're extremely supportive of one another. Ultimately, they will be the most stable people in each other's lives." Margot sums up the success of Specialized Housing with an anecdote. "The morning after the mother of one of the residents passed away, the house manager came into the kitchen to find two women at home. When he asked one whether she shouldn't be at work, she told him, 'My friend's mother has died. She shouldn't be alone today.'"

— Lesleigh Cushing (GRS'00)