

Nemitz: A moving gesture that means the world

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SOUTH PORTLAND -Today is the first day of the rest of Anna Bulger's life.



Anna Bulger, left, gets some help with her belongings Saturday from her parents Mary Chris and Paul Bulger. Anna and seven others this weekend are moving into a nine-bedroom, renovated home in South Portland.

John Ewing/Staff Photographer

Literally.

"I feel pretty excited," Anna said with a shy smile Saturday morning as she and her parents, Mary Chris and Paul Bulger, moved her clothes, books and other belongings into her new digs at 20 E St. Anna has autism. For every one of her 21 years, she's lived under the watchful eyes of her parents and two younger siblings at their home in Cape Elizabeth. If she were like most Mainers with developmental disabilities, she'd have two choices as she steps from the cocoon of adolescence into the uncertainties of young adulthood: She could continue to live with her parents, stuck in her role as a dependent child as she and they grow ever older. Or she could get on one of many waiting lists and spend months or even years waiting for an apartment or group home operated and paid for by the state or various social service agencies.

Instead, Anna and seven others like her, starting this weekend, are moving into a nine-bedroom, beautifully renovated home in the heart of South Portland's Knightville neighborhood. And while it may look from a distance like one of those group homes, there's one fundamental difference. Their families own it. "I say it's like an elephant with stripes," said a smiling Paul Bulger, a Portland attorney who happens to specialize in real estate law. "It wasn't an animal anyone had seen before in Maine."

It all started back in 2006. Anna was nearing the end of her years as a special-needs student in the Cape Elizabeth School system, where she'd sung in the chorus, run with the cross-country team, and, as best she could, tried to keep up with the often dizzying world around her. By that time, of course, Paul and Mary Chris Bulger knew all about the challenges of raising an autistic child -- the "echolalic speech" patterns in which Anna converses by repeating dialogue from her favorite movies, the "tactile sensitivity" that leaves her goosebumped and shivering in a warm summer breeze, the obsessive need to stuff tissues back into their boxes, the overwhelming anxiety that washes over her the moment her beloved Boston Red Sox fall even one run behind..."They're hypersensitive to life in so many ways," noted Mary Chris, who also had to weather the widely-held myth back in the 1980s that autism was somehow caused by a mother's unconscious desire to detach from her child.

Less clear to the Bulgers was what awaited Anna once she aged out of the school system -- and all the services that came with it -- when she turned 20. "It was during that time that I said, 'Well, I've got to go out and figure out what this adult world

looks like," recalled Mary Chris. It was by no means an encouraging picture. The Bulgers soon realized that in these days of ever-shrinking state budgets, with a relatively high-functioning child like Anna, they were on their own.

"So we said, 'We're going to have to take this into our own hands,'" recalled Mary Chris. They haven't let go since. In March of 2008, the Bulgers bought what was then the shell of a 116-year-old former Grange hall on E Street. Their plan: Rather than wait for state-funded housing that might never materialize, transform the property into a nine-bedroom condominium for young adults with developmental disabilities. Each resident's family would own his or her bedroom and share a common kitchen, living room and other communal space.

Working with Specialized Housing Inc., a Massachusetts-based nonprofit that has used the same model successfully in that state, the Bulgers spent the next two years making it happen. They got a much needed zoning adjustment from City Hall. They got the Maine State Housing Authority to approve Section 8 housing vouchers for the residents. While all of them are expected to have regular jobs -- Anna works two days a week hanging clothes at Marshall's -- their low incomes still qualify them for the assistance. Through Specialized Housing, they hired staff -- two live-ins with apartments on the third floor and a 40-hour-a-week house manager with an office just off the kitchen -- to help the residents keep their lives on track. They even got the Maine Department of Health and Human Services to kick in \$80,000 in operational support for the first year -- a fraction of what it would cost if Anna and her new house mates were entirely dependent on the state. Brian Scanlon, the DHHS team leader for adult developmental services in southern Maine, spearheaded the grant. While he knows not everyone has the means to do this kind of thing, he sees it as "a laboratory" for future private-public partnerships in Maine. "We're still there for parents who have no means and we're there for those folks who have no family at all," Scanlon said. "But to have these parents step up and take so much on themselves, I think, is truly commendable."

And what about the neighbors? What do they think about this one-of-a-kind condo development? "We think it's wonderful," replied Dan Hogan, who lives a few houses down E Street and stopped by Saturday to welcome Anna to the neighborhood. "We all talked together and said, 'This is a good thing.'" It's also, as Mary Chris put it, still "a huge leap of faith."

In order to break even on what is now a \$1.2 million investment, all nine condos must sell for between \$125,000 and \$150,000. So far, closings have been completed or scheduled on only eight. There's also a \$1,700-per-month fee that each resident's family must pay to cover staffing, food and other operations. While much of that might ultimately be offset by Supplemental Security Insurance and other government benefits, it's nevertheless a tall order for families still recovering from the worst recession in recent memory.

But it's happening. And the Bulgers aren't the only ones who see this as a dream come true. "We've been working on this for so long," said Karen Atkinson of Portland, who along with her husband, Tom, were the first to come aboard the Bulgers' vision back in 2008. Their 33-year-old daughter Ellen, who is severely hearing impaired and has learning disabilities, moved in Saturday down the hall from her longtime friend Anna. "The fact that it's coming to fruition just seems surreal," said Atkinson. "Ellen has wanted for 10 years to live with other kids who are just like her."

There is, of course, a downside to this weekend's flurry of cardboard boxes, wall hangings and decisions on what goes where. For every bedroom that fills up at 20 E St., another one back home is now empty. That would explain the tears in Mary Chris' eyes as she stood in the entrance of her daughter's new home and realized that Anna, starting today, calls someplace else "home." "I showed my husband my calendar for next week and I said, 'Look! It's blank!'" Mary Chris said. "It's always been so full -- not just with E Street stuff, but with Anna stuff." And how, after 21 years, does that feel? Mary Chris blinked back the tears and forced a smile.

"Scary," she said.

The way life should be.

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