

Martin Finds New Life at Opengate

Developmentally-disabled and non-verbal since birth, Martin, 63, moved from a New York City facility to an Intermediate Care Facility (ICF) home at Opengate about two years ago.

“At Opengate, Martin is healthy, happy and celebrated,” says his sister, Florence. This was not always the case, she adds, since for most of his adult life it was a long, difficult time with frequent trips to the emergency room and few satisfactory explanations for why he needed to go to the hospital.

“It was as though he was just finally able to exhale.”

*—Florence,
Martin’s sister*

“After my mother was unable to supervise Martin’s care due to her advancing years, I searched to find an appropriate, safe residence for Martin,” says Florence, and we were very grateful to hear of the availability of a placement at Opengate.”

Miraculously, she says, there was no transition time for her brother. “It was as though he was just finally able to exhale,” says Florence. “Martin is now functioning as an important part of his community. He is on fewer medications and he is able to actually smile at appropriate times.”

“Moreover,” she adds, “he is socially interacting with his peers, teachers, staff and doctors. He plays ball and table games with others. There is a bounce to his step and it’s clear he enjoys his daily routine.”

Martin has improved so markedly that he is now part of an advanced program that includes day trips and recreation. According to Florence, “Martin, once and for all, has a life!”

“My daily worry about him has been replaced with

confidence and peace of mind. I know that he is in good hands and that he is functioning in the least restrictive environment.” Her brother has “advanced socially, physically and emotionally. It just doesn’t get any better than this. I am so gratified to see him thriving.” 🐾



Martin and staff member Algafar Ameen enjoying a day at the New York City piers.

Annual Awards Event a Hit

More than 100 Opengate residents, family members, staff, and Board members enjoyed the Annual Awards luncheon at Ceola Manor in Jefferson Valley on Sunday, June 28th. In addition, there was a separate celebration at the Somers location for those who were not able to attend.

Of course, the highlight of the day in Yorktown was the dancing as many joined in the fun while also dressed in their finest clothes for the occasion. A professional DJ provided music. Simply put, there were smiles all around.



Lakisha and her sister

Awards in the form of ribbon-tied scrolls were given to each individual for their own personal achievements.

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CEO's Message

Dear Friends of Opengate,

Continuing in my series of addressing how updated NYS regulations are affecting Opengate, I'd like to bring to your attention the Olmstead Act, signed into law by the US Supreme Court 16 years ago but resonating just as strongly today.

According to the US Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, the story of the Olmstead case began when two women with mental illness and developmental disabilities were voluntarily admitted to a state-run psychiatric unit in a Georgia hospital. Following their medical treatment, mental health professionals agreed that the two were ready to move to community-based programs; however they remained confined in the institution for several years and filed suit under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) for release from the hospital.

In June 1999, the US Supreme Court decreed that "unjustified segregation of persons with disabilities constitutes discrimination in violation of Title II of the ADA." In part, the Court held that public entities must provide community-based services to persons with disabilities. Moreover, the court held that states are required to provide community-based services to people with disabilities when: (a) such services are appropriate; (b) the affected persons do not oppose community-based treatment; and (c) community-based services can be reasonably accommodated, taking into account the resources available to the state and the needs of others who are receiving disability services from the state.

New York State Response

In November 2012, Governor Cuomo created the Olmstead Cabinet, charged with developing a plan consistent with the obligations

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PROFILE: Randi Rios-Castro, COO

To call Chief Operating Officer Randi Rios-Castro "busy" would be quite an understatement. Not only has she accumulated quite an array of hats to wear over her 15-plus years at Opengate, she's on call 24/7. Far from being overwhelmed, however, Randi finds each new day to be a challenging and rewarding experience.



Tracy (left) and Randi

Childhood Dreams

Randi doesn't remember a time when she wasn't interested in the field of human services. She got her start as a public school teacher and then saw an opportunity to work at New York Hospital Cornell Medical: Westchester Division, in a children's inpatient unit.

"The most rewarding aspect of my job is working with the residents and helping them to achieve their goals."

—Randi Rios-Castro

There, Randi worked closely with children with psychiatric conditions and those with a dual diagnosis of mental illness and developmental disability. This helped Randi gain an understanding of the unique wants and needs of those individuals and how to provide the most effective services for them.

Moving on to a position of guardianship advocacy at Westchester ARC, she was promoted to their Quality Assurance Department, where she was tasked with assessing and auditing the qualities of each program and service they offered.

A Natural Evolution

Starting in Quality Assurance when she began working at Opengate in 1999, she monitored activities and in-house audits for the purposes of continuous improvement (similar to her position at Westchester ARC). Because auditing requires a hands-on look at all facets of a not-for-profit agency, Randi says she "learned everything about every aspect of the agency just by doing the audits."

From here, Randi moved through the ranks quickly, first as supervisor of Medicaid Service Coordination and then as overseer of Training, Maintenance and Opengate's Medical Department. Promoted to Assistant Executive

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CEO's Message *continued from page 2*

under the 1999 US Supreme Court decision. Three of its components directly impact our consumers.

- NYS is closing state-run institutional facilities, called developmental centers. They plan to retain capacity for only 150 individuals statewide from over 1000 in 2013 after all scheduled closures are complete. Some provider-operated facilities are also at risk of closure. Provider-run Intermediate Care Facilities (ICFs) with greater than 14 beds are being categorized as institutional facilities. Opengate has a 34-bed ICF in Somers that is far from institutional. Set within the rural town of Somers and located right next to the Heritage Hills residential community, our ICF is not one very large structure, but is comprised of three houses and one day program building. We are hopeful that that NYS will review our unique layout and allow the facility to 'transition' to one that is recognized as community-based.
- The State has also implemented a person-centered intake practice that creates a long lag in our own intake process. While worthy on its face, the NYS Front Door Initiative offers more choices of community-based supports for individuals and their families affording them the ability to self-direct their services, including residential care. While this offers more choices to families, there can be a long wait time for placement.
- NYS wants to close sheltered employment workshops and allow competitive employment only; that is integrated, gainful employment at minimum wage or higher. The theory behind this change is that it is discriminatory to allow indi-

viduals with developmental disabilities to work only with other individuals with developmental disabilities. Effective July 1, 2013 the NYS Office for People with Developmental Disabilities (OPWDD) stopped all new admissions into sheltered workshops. Luckily Opengate individuals that currently work in sheltered workshops will be allowed to continue their employment. However, we are uncertain how long this will continue. By OPWDD's own assessment, they estimate that only 50% of the participants will make the transition to integrated employment.

As you can see, Opengate faces many challenges in implementing new regulations. We must continue to advocate on our consumers' behalf that these changes remain rational and just and are not simply applied across the board. As always, I welcome your comments and suggestions.

Sincerely,



Brian A. Hulten, LCSW
Chief Executive Officer

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They include noted progress in things such as Plant Care, Gardening Skills, Socialization Skills, Advocacy Skills and Leadership Skills.

Chief Executive Officer Brian Hulten and Chief Operating Officer Randi Rios-Castro both offered remarks applauding the individuals' achievements. 🌟

Each month Opengate plans improvements, additions, or modifications to our infrastructure as well as purchases items for our individuals' use, such as computers, greenhouse tools, etc.

Your donations make our work possible!

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Randi Rios-Castro *continued from page 3*

Director and, then, COO, Randi also is in charge of Residential and Day Habilitation programs as well as Human Resources.

Randi feels an integral part of her success is in the fact that she spends a lot of her time interacting with staff and residents. This helps ensure all facility operations are functioning as smoothly and seamlessly as possible. She attends staff, committee, and department head meetings regularly to ensure everyone is on the same page and has a platform for addressing concerns.

Fulfilling and Rewarding

“The most rewarding aspect of my job is working with the residents and helping them to achieve their goals,” Randi says. “I like to watch them grow, make progress, and see the little and big things that make a difference in their lives.”

Randi mentions one resident who experienced rapid personal growth after being with Opengate for a short time. “Getting pictures of him doing things he’s never done in his life like going on a boat cruise or attending a party is so worthwhile,” Randi says. “For some, success is getting through the day without hurting themselves. For others, it’s going out into the

community and getting a job,” explains Randi. “No single development is more important than the other.”

Bi-monthly Resident Meetings are typically attended by anywhere from 10 to 16 residents and Randi joins them for another opportunity to discuss their own and their housemates’ needs as well as voice their opinions on what’s working and what could be improved upon in their house.

For staff, the information gained from these meetings is invaluable, as it gives them the opportunity to continually improve the way they serve each resident. A member of Opengate’s Board of Directors is also a member of this committee.

Creative “Down Time”

Randi is never really “off the clock”, but when she does get some time to herself, she enjoys reading and walking along a bike path in Putnam County either with her children, dogs, or alone. She is a Girl Scout leader and helps raise funds for several other non-profit agencies of interest. Opengate is lucky to have such a warm-hearted and multi-talented executive at the helm of many of the agency’s departments. 🐾

**To contact Randi,
email her at randir@opengateinc.org**