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One of the family UCS Shared Living program pairs clients with families - and homes

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BENNINGTON -- Stacey's bedroom, dominated by pink tones, is filled with some of the artwork she has created since moving in with the Von Ouhl family and becoming part of it about 16 years ago.

Stacey, 39, who lives with Marilyn Von Ouhl and her family as part of United Counseling Service's Shared Living program, beams with pride as she displays various pieces of work. She enjoys building things, and her favorite piece, she said in sign language, is a home made of wood with a stone pathway.

The Shared Living Program began at UCS about 30 years ago. It allows developmentally disabled people who cannot live alone, or may not be able to continue living with family, to continue the experience of living with a family.

It began as a more cost-effective way to provide care traditional institutions offered. But it also provided better treatment and care for the developmentally disabled, said Kathy Hamilton, director of developmental services at UCS.

"It supports our treatment beliefs for people, that no matter who you are, what your disability is, you should have the right to all of the freedoms, all of the opportunities that everybody else has, which means being fully integrated with the community, being able to have a family life," Hamilton said.

There are currently about 50 individuals taking part in the program in Bennington County, Hamilton said. Those in the program have a varying range of disabilities, and



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Marilyn Von Ouhl, center, reaches out to Stacey, a United Counseling Service client, who has...

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therefore, there are different goals for each.

"For some people it could be that the goal is to live with a family, gain some skills, get more independent and be able to move on to living on your own," she said. "For the majority of people living in a home we expect that this is probably going to be their home, hopefully, for life. There's nothing more traumatic for most of us than having to move, or losing family members."

For Stacey, who previously attended the Austine School for the Deaf in Brattleboro, living with the Von Ouhls on the outskirts of Bennington has been a great fit. Marilyn Von Ouhl and her family welcomed Stacey into their home when Stacey was 24. Since then, Von Ouhl's three children and Stacey have grown together and basically become siblings.

"When Stacey came we had a house full," Von Ouhl said. "We just had a very busy, full, hectic household."

Stacey has been able to participate in all of the activities she loves -- Special Olympics, bowling, art,

dancing and plenty of parties.

"We do a lot. We're a very sociable family. We don't wait until there's necessarily a good reason to do it, we'll just get together and have a good time," Von Ouhl said.

The Von Ouhls have gained something, too. "(Stacey) has enabled our family to just experience things, everyday life, in a different way," Von Ouhl said. "She's a very joyful person. She is the kind of person who will always see the good."

"You can open up your heart to another person," Von Ouhl added. "You're talking about everything that goes along with that. You have the opportunity ... to make a difference in somebody's life. She's got a life. She does stuff. She goes places. She's a girlie girl. She's fun. She has her own personal activities that are things she does. She hangs out with the family."

Von Ouhl said she and her family -- three children and a husband -- all learned sign language. It helped them communicate with Stacey, but also helped them understand a different culture.

"It gave us, all of us, and especially my children, the opportunity to learn something new, and not just sign language, but about the deaf world," Von Ouhl said.

Carol Brace said she was used to a full house and wasn't quite comfortable when kids moved out and it was just she and her husband. That's when she decided to take part in the Shared Living Program about 20 years ago.

"I kind of like to have some spirit in the house," Brace said. "I think you stay young that way."

Kathy, 39, fits the bill. She's a relentless volunteer at the Centers for Living and Rehabilitation, part of Southwestern Vermont Health Care. In fact, Kathy recently logged her 7,000th volunteer hour.

"I like to keep busy. I don't like to sit around, I just like to keep going," she said. "I wish I was 20. I feel like I'm 20 now."

Shared Living has provided a home for Kathy with the resources she needs, and has allowed her to partake in family activities. "I do all kinds of stuff with them -- camping and vacations," Kathy said. "I go tag-saling."

Kathy has become a member of the family, Brace said. "A lot of people don't realize that Kathy is in a program. They just think she is part of our family," she said.

Hamilton said the program does provide tax-free compensation for families, typically between \$19,000 and \$26,000, per year. Families must be approved by UCS after an interview, a home visit and a background check, she said. UCS is also seeking new families interested in opening their homes to a new family member.

The experience of the Shared Living Program has been invaluable, Von Ouhl said.

"It's been a good thing, not just for the kids in the family, but all of us in the family, to develop a sense of compassion, to ... heighten your understanding," she said. "We are just happy to have her be a part of our active, loving, supportive family. It's, I think, helped us appreciate life all the more."

Contact Neal P. Goswami at ngoswami@benningtonbanner.com

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