

# **From Trial to Triumph:** *How 'Very Special Homes' is Changing One Life at a Time*



*By Jennifer Bonazzo Peters*

**W**hen Barbara and Larry Weiner were raising their son Jonathan, they never dreamed of him being diagnosed with a pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified (PDD NOS), which is a part of the Autism spectrum, at the age of four. Their child seemed to be very much on track with his peers until pre-K, when the staff called Barbara in to inform her of social issues between Jonathan and his fellow classmates.

As a teacher and, of course, an advocate of her son, Barbara called in her own resources and child study teams to assist with the evaluation process. The diagnosis was ultimately confirmed.



Jonathan tried immensely to cooperate with and succeed in both the basic living and working facets of the world. In fact, after attending a forum school along with Bergen County Vocational Technical High School, it was as though he exuded so easily what most parents would want for their children: an utter passion for personal achievement and an authentic ambition which fueled this in every capacity. For example, Jonathan was named valedictorian of his vocational preparatory school; he received his driver's license; and he saved every dime he had to purchase his own vehicle. Jonathan continued on his healing journey with a hands-on training program at the JFK Career Development Program in Edison, a facility that assists those facing struggles following a stroke or brain injury in addition to diagnoses similar to that of Jonathan's. He received crucial coaching in areas of life that so many of us take for granted. It was through active participation that he learned basic home repairs, doing his own laundry and training in cooking. In essence, Jonathan was laying the groundwork for a solid foundation in his adult life. At this same location, he was also being trained and paid to work in the actual hospital there doing medical billing. He later attended William Paterson University, where he explored his love of singing and playing the piano and received his Bachelor of Arts in Music Studies.

Shortly after, Jonathan faced unemployment for over two years. This pained Barbara, his mother, straight to her heart because her main goal is to be his advocate in life, but her hands were tied. Interview after interview, there were no callbacks. Although Jonathan had the intellect and was the epitome of motivation, he lacked the customer service skills to accompany these fine qualities. His bad luck streak soon came to an end and golden opportunities began to arise in every facet of his life. The same forum school in Waldwick that Jonathan

attended himself offered him a full-time position as a teacher's assistant, aiding teachers with the multi-handicapped students.

"I have a first-hand understanding of what they are going through," said Jonathan. "So I love being able to help them. Now I have the chance to give back to the community in this way."

His parents Larry and Barbara beamed with pride overall and noted that he was even selected to become a certi-

fied lifeguard there.

But this was only the beginning of Jonathan's newfound independence. Barbara's sister who works for TD Bank, frequent contributors of the Bergen County United Way, received word about their new program in partnership with Madeline Corporation: the Very Special Homes Program. After an application process, Jonathan was called in for an interview and is now living in one of these attractive homes in Mahwah



Pictured: Top, Sonja Bozic (right), a filmmaker, has created a movie – "Chocolate Milk" – on Jonathan Weiner's life. Bottom, Jonathan Weiner (far left) is joined by his parents – Barbara and Larry – and family member Paul (far right).



with a roommate, who was carefully selected by the Bergen County United Way.

Very Special Homes provide affordable housing for those with special needs, survivors of domestic violence, seniors and veterans and their families. The Bergen County United Way President Tom Toronto and Madeline Corp Executive Director Shari DePalma have together created a chance for people in Jonathan's situation to lead an independent and more liberated lifestyle. Not only do these homes become the gateway to individual growth, but also they bestow something priceless: a true sense of accomplishment and pride. Within these communities the residents are fully embraced in to a caring neighborhood, succeeding in an independent life overall. Furthermore, the homes are specifically designed to meet their tenants' needs. The communities are run by management who also arrange for a variety of social events, such as pizza and movie nights, summer BBQs and holiday parties. The staff even keeps the parents informed of significant happenings by phone as well.

Currently, there are 24 developments for Very Special Homes, but they con-



tinue several building plans and the sky is the limit for the 50,000 individuals like Jonathan, now age 31, living in New Jersey with disabilities. Jonathan's mother sees such a dramatic change in Jonathan's behaviors when he comes over for dinners since he has lived in the ranch that Very Special Homes has helped him obtain. This has sparked such a hope for his future.

"Very Special Homes has really helped Jonathan evolve into a man and grow as a person in general," Barbara said.

Jonathan agrees whole-heartedly.

"Very Special Homes has given me independence. It helps me to do chores, clean and gives me the convenience of shopping at nearby locations," he said.

While the attainment of Jonathan's adult life continues to prosper with the

assistance of this program, simultaneously does the inspiration of his personal story as a whole. Jonathan's father, Larry, who works in PR at Montclair State University, was recently talking with his colleague Sonja Bozic, a filmmaker. She shared with Larry that she was interested in creating a movie based on Jonathan's life. Upon meeting with him in person, the decision to move forward with the film was easy.

Jonathan experienced a memorable trip all the way to Switzerland with Bozic to a film workshop and contest there, where the film won two major awards. One of these awards brought him to Paris, where funding of the film was granted. Jonathan's father is currently helping with the script for the film. Jonathan will be playing himself. Once completed, the movie, "Chocolate Milk," a simple yet truly fitting title, will give viewers an inside look to Jonathan's life from his perspective. When Bozic went out for dinner for the first time to meet Jonathan about the film, he ordered chocolate milk – what a way to capture the essence of this truly influential, courageous, independent and intelligent man with his innocent heart of youth.

For more information on the  
Very Special Homes Program, visit  
[www.bergenunitedway.org](http://www.bergenunitedway.org).

