

Leland Ray: Living a Community-Based Life in Roxboro

by Aisander Duda

Nestled on a small hill in Roxboro, surrounded by ancient oaks and pecan trees, is a beautiful 1930s-era farmhouse with a long front porch, occupied by well-worn rocking chairs. On one bright and sunny morning, the front door is wide open, and “Hot Stuff” by Donna Summer is blasting into the carefully-tended garden on the front lawn. Inside, gathered in a long, spacious dining room, “Mama Jo” Shotwell is leading a group of a dozen developmentally-disabled men and women in dance. Mama Jo is a bubbly and vibrant woman who has been working with this group for more than 15 years. As she dances around the room clapping and singing, she calls out each person’s name, pulling them further into the activity. Those that can stand up are shaking their hips and swinging their arms. Those who are wheelchair-bound

raise their hands into the air and smile and laugh with their companions. This is Generations Adult Day Services, which provides care and therapies for Roxboro residents with developmental disabilities and severe dementia. At Generations, those with mental retardation, autism, and dementia get a mix of socialization, physical therapy and activity, and education from 8 a.m. until 4 p.m.

After Mama Jo gets the group’s blood flowing with some dancing and stretching, she immediately jumps into the first activity of the day, which varies from one person to the next. A young man in a mechanized wheelchair is shown flash cards with images of different animals by an aide, which prompts him to try and name the creature. While the young man cannot verbalize his answers well, the aide continues to prompt him and then gives him the correct answer if he misses. Sitting across the table from him is a quiet woman in her 70s who has severe Alzheimer’s disease. Her activity is a word-finding puzzle. She glances around the room smiling at everyone.

Just down the table sits another older gentleman. He is working on the same type of puzzle as the woman, but his focus

is intense. This is Leland Ray (above), who has mental retardation and autism. Leland is an avid walker, making his way to many of the local shops and public spaces in Roxboro, often catching a ride home with anyone from the police, to the fire department, to local store employees, and even other shoppers. Leland lives just up the hill from Generations, a short walk for him. He lives in a small house with four other developmentally disabled men, part of the independent living program of Person County Group Homes, Inc.

Mama Jo looks over at him and says, “Leland, tell me what time it is?” Leland pauses and refocuses his attention on the clock in front of him. “One minute past 10, Mama Jo,” he says quietly, flashing her a big smile.

Joyce Riley, who is the Program Director of Generations Adult Day Services, says that each member of this group has a set of tasks and goals that they must complete. All of their tasks are set up to challenge them and improve their ability to take care of their own life needs. Some of Leland’s



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tasks include serving and cleaning up breakfast, helping cook some of the lunches, planning the event and activity calendar with Mama Jo, and working on his ability to tell time, among others. Riley says that on a typical day, the Generations staff tries to provide five types of activities to challenge individuals in the program; passive activities, such as watching TV; active tasks, such as working on a puzzle or game; exercise, such as dancing; communication, such as working with a staff member on a project; and educational activities, such as being read a short article about health and wellness.

Leland and the Generations group will spend the morning hours in this large, old dairy farmhouse participating in these types of activities, watching “The Price is Right” on TV, and cooking a family-style lunch. Once a month, they have the Roxboro Fire Department over for a few games of bingo, and just recently the group donated a rose bush to a local retirement home. When Mama Jo and the other staff mention the fish fry they are planning

for Father’s Day, the whole room buzzes with excitement. “I try to mix things up for them, to get them excited, and to provide variety,” says Shotwell. “This place is their whole world. For most of them, after they leave here in the morning, they go home and get dinner and a bath and that’s it. At [Generations] these folks at least have a chance to be part of a close group, learn skills, and to interact in a way they may not normally.”

After Leland Ray finishes a busy morning at Generations, he walks up the hill and returns to his home, but his day is far from over. On this particular afternoon, Leland is late returning home from Generations and John Noland, the qualified professional that oversees the operation of several independent living programs and adult care homes, is worried Leland might have gone out for one of his famous long walks. Noland, a retired high school teacher from West Virginia, has been with Person County Group Homes for nearly eight years and knows Leland’s habits well.

“I used to worry about Leland walking around on his own,” says Noland. “But he’s pretty careful about where he goes, and now people all over Roxboro know him and know where he lives. I’ve followed him home in my car on several occasions just to be sure he’s all right.”

Noland says that Leland is just one of

more than 80 Roxboro residents living in Person County Group Homes, Inc., and 50 in their day services programs. The five men in this particular group home receive funding at various levels from the N.C. Community Alternatives Program for the Developmentally Disabled (CAP MR/DD) as a means of paying for their services, says Noland. Each individual in the home also is employed in the community, earning their own money to spend on food, hobbies, and vacations. Employment for the members of this group can range from working in a restaurant to a supportive workshop at Person Industries, a county-sponsored work program which recently began handling the processing of all of Person County’s recyclable materials. The other four members of the home work either full- or part-time jobs. Leland, at age 64, is what Noland terms “retired.”

“He still does some work around the house apart from his normal tasks, and he gets paid for doing things like raking leaves in the yard,” says Noland.



Noland then turns away and cups his hand over his furrowed brow as he scans the road leading toward the house for any sign of Leland. Then, a red pickup truck comes rolling up to the house. John Noland smiles wide, and out pops Leland and Mike Jones, a supervisor, who oversees the daily activities in Leland's house. "Sorry we're late. Leland was getting his glasses fixed," says Mike, a middle-aged man with a Southern drawl and neatly trimmed, graying mustache.

Mike has been working with the developmentally disabled for more than 18 years. In his current position with Person County Group Homes, Inc., Mike oversees the daily activities of the five men in Leland's home, including helping them learn and develop life skills, assisting them with their finances, and transporting the group to doctor appointments and shopping. Mike only stays through dinnertime, making sure everyone in the house has completed their tasks and chores and has received any one-on-one time they need. At night, the residents are on their own, but rarely call upon Mike or John Noland for



Leland Ray shows Mike Jones, right, pictures from the group's recent trip to the beach.

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assistance. "I've had only a few serious incidents at night in the time I've been here," says Mike. "Usually if there's an issue, it's because someone has switched medications and is having an adverse reaction or something like that."

Leland leads the way into the house, a small brick ranch home divided into five individual suites — each with a living area, bedroom, large closet, and

shared bathroom. Leland's suite is clean and well-kept except for the small hobby table in his living room, which is covered by countless batteries, broken electronics, and tools. Mike says that Leland is enormously interested in the inner-workings of everyday electronics like clocks, radios, and small toys. In fact, Leland carries a handheld radio in his pocket everywhere he goes. The rest of his suite is sparsely furnished with a TV, couch, bed, dresser, refrigerator, and homemade art that Leland has crafted during his time at Generations.

The house is old and worn but also quite homey, with a large communal kitchen and dining area. In the kitchen hangs a small laminated list of chores that each member of the house must complete daily, such as vacuuming the common areas or cleaning the kitchen. On one wall of the kitchen, from floor to ceiling, is a mural of geese flying over an expansive lake and forest. Mike says that the mural is something to brighten the room up, and Leland smiles and nods approvingly. It is here in the kitchen that

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	MOPPING	TRASH	DISHES	VACUUM	BEDROOM
MONDAY	STEPHEN	DAVID	JOHN	BRIAN	LELAND
TUESDAY	LELAND	STEPHEN	DAVID	JOHN	BRIAN
WEDNESDAY	BRIAN	LELAND	STEPHEN	DAVID	JOHN
THURSDAY	JOHN	BRIAN	LELAND	STEPHEN	DAVID
FRIDAY	DAVID	JOHN	BRIAN	LELAND	STEPHEN

BUMPASS LANE
 STAFF GUIDELINES

ON WEEKENDS: NO ONE IS TO GO ON AN OUTING UNTIL HOUSE CHORES ARE COMPLETED. THIS IS STAFF CHOICE. IF ANYONE REFUSES TO DO THEIR WEEKLY CHORES, THEY MAY NOT GO ON THE OUTINGS WITH THE OTHER RESIDENTS. HOWEVER, ALL SERVICES WILL BE GIVEN TO THIS RESIDENT

Leland has recently been doing a lot of work, learning how to cook new dishes with Mike's help.

"I've been trying to teach Leland how to cook scrambled eggs for a couple months now," says Mike. "He's gotten better, but we're not quite there. I try to keep him from burning himself or flipping the eggs onto the burner." Along with these skills, Mike has been helping Leland improve his verbal communication as well. Due to Mike's poor hearing, he says that Leland has been forced to speak louder and more clearly when they work together. Mike chuckles and says, "I never intended to work on that with him, so that's a happy accident."

Sitting down at the kitchen table, Leland immediately begins pulling out picture albums and souvenirs from the group's latest vacation — a trip to Myrtle Beach. John Noland says that every year they give each individual in their communities an opportunity to go on a vacation.

Everyone saves up the wages they earn throughout the year to afford the trips.

Closer to home, the staff of Person County Group Homes makes sure there are plenty of opportunities for fun. Some residents enjoy barbecues. Others



have a membership in a sports club. Still others try out for the Special Olympics. Leland, prior to his retirement, was on the Person County Special Olympics Equestrian Team and also possesses several trophies from local

bowling clubs. Each resident of the group homes is offered opportunities to live a full, active life.

With this blend of oversight and autonomy, structure and independence, Leland Ray has been given the opportunity to live his life as an integrated, active member of the Roxboro community. This was the goal of mental health reform, but it's not everyone's experience. ☞☞

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