



breaking barriers

helping people with disabilities help themselves

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A Moment of Grace: Creating the Barrier Free Living Apartments

Two years after breaking ground on the \$42-million Barrier Free Living Apartments in the Bronx, Program Director Thomas Obrzut sits down with Barrier Free Living's Founder/CEO Paul Feuerstein to discuss the project's road to success.

Tom:

So Paul, what was it that originally gave you the idea for Supportive Housing?

Paul:

There were two things at our Freedom House domestic violence program that were catalysts.

One was people who approached us with disabilities and asked us in the screening process "How long can I stay?"

Originally it was 135 days, now it's 180 days. The next question was, "Where do I go from there?" and quite honestly, unless someone was coming from a NYCHA apartment or were coming with a Section Eight certificate and could be transferred to an apartment, we would advise them that they would probably wind up in a homeless shelter.

When confronted with that possibility, there were people with disabilities who would say, "I feel safer staying with my abuser." So that was one piece, to say we need to have an answer for people when they call Freedom House that creates a continuum of care, to say, "yes, we have supportive



Thomas Obrzut (left) and Paul Feuerstein.

housing in development, and within the period of time that you are with us at Freedom House, we will be opening this up and you will be able to move into a permanent location with support services."

The other catalyst was that 20 percent of the families that come to Freedom House have so many issues they would need supportive housing to succeed in community living.

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Letter from the Editor



New York City, 1978.

A subway ride was 50 cents, the famed Mudd Club swung open its doors to the likes of Lou Reed and Andy Warhol, and young visionary Paul Feuerstein fought for the rights of people with disabilities to have affordable, accessible housing.

This September, Paul and his team of 120 staff continue the work he began in 1978, opening the Barrier Free Living Apartments in the Bronx (the original federally funded "Project Outward Bound" led to the creation of Barrier Free Living in 1981).

Supportive Housing is the fifth BFL program to work with people with disabilities, as well as survivors of domestic violence with disabilities.

Paul's interview with Supportive Housing Director Tom Obrzut gives this special issue its backbone. It is supported by stories that illustrate how we continue to strengthen our mission as we approach our landmark 40th anniversary—from our visit with resident LeVar Jeffers (page 3) to the launch of a video to enhance the accessibility of information to Deaf and Hard of Hearing survivors (page 4).

A lot has changed since 1978. The subway is \$2.50. The Mudd Club is a memory. But our groundbreaking work with people with disabilities and survivors of domestic violence with disabilities continues to thrive, evolve and grow stronger. — *Scott Hess, Editor.*

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A Moment of Grace: Creating the Barrier

Oftentimes, we would find that the lion’s share of our staff time was devoted to helping the 20 percent with greater needs than the rest.

Also, there would be families that would come in and clearly would not need supportive housing. I can think of a 20-something mother. Every day her kids were dressed well, they would have their lunches ready, they went to school on time. That was somebody who didn’t need to be in supportive housing.

But there were families on the other end of the capability spectrum who were just drowning. They were either going to lose their kids or they were going to wind up back with their abuser or both, if things continued without significant supports for them as they moved out into the community.

Tom:

What were the requirements that guided your search?

Paul:

There were three things. It needed to be someplace relatively flat for wheelchair users and it needed to be near a grocery store and near public transportation, preferably buses. And that’s it.



Resident Aide, Darique Ruiz

We looked and looked and finally we were connected through the Supportive

Housing Network with Alembic Development. Alembic had an option-to-buy on property at 138th Street and Cypress. The property we have now. I looked at it and said, “Wow this is it.”

There are two crosstown buses in

front of the family building site. There’s a subway stop half a block away. A grocery store across the street, right on the edge of a commercial area—138th Street, where there’s a lot of shopping opportunities. We couldn’t do better. Right across the street from a fire station.

Tom:

Right, right.

Paul:

This was perfect.



Director of Social Services Denise Shaw in the lobby of the Families building.

“No matter what we will be an integrated program because there are so many disabilities and so many stories”

Tom:

Three blocks from the police.

Paul:

It was a moment of grace from my perspective.

We spent some time getting to know the Alembic folks. It turns out the partners in Alembic are Quakers and their work comes with a double bottom line. They’re in development because they need to make money to support their families, but they’re also looking to do good for the community.

And that was an important thing for us in getting into a partnership. After a certain courtship period, we went into a legal agreement for the property and the process of putting together architectural pieces and other pieces in order to move forward. And that process has taken us three or four years to get from the initial meetings to where we are in full partnership with folks

and it’s been a good partnership so far.

We appreciate the people we are working with, they understand our population, they are supportive of us. Alembic was honest in saying they could make more money in something besides supportive housing, but they believed in our mission, so here we are.



A young resident of Barrier Free Living apartments.



ier Free Living Apartments - continued.



Social workers (left to right) Tamara Carathers, Sandra Mustelie, Alicia Martinez.

Tom:

So the groups we are talking about here include disabled veterans, people who are survivors of domestic violence, and folks with physical disabilities. Did I leave something out?

Paul:

That's basically it. We have 29 years working with victims of domestic violence and physical assault. For us, moving into an area that is ours, if you will. It's our passion. It's what we've been doing since we've started. That's been important. Right now there is a dearth of housing for people with disabilities. And until that's been addressed we will unapologetically build supportive housing for people with disabilities. People with disabilities are people. They are not a bloc, they are not all the same.

No matter what, we will be an integrated program because there are so many disabilities and so many stories,

so many reasons people need what we have, that we are not going to be monolithic in our approach or in terms of the people who live in our buildings. There will be great diversity and we will delight and support that diversity in everything we do because that makes our lives richer.

Tom:

So you had this vision and it became a reality. A multimillion dollar project with families and individuals moving into it. How does that feel for you?

Paul:

It's great. It's a milestone.

I look at it like I did when I was a marathon runner back in the 70s. For me, the marathon wasn't about running 26 miles. For me it was about getting to the next block. From the next block to the next block, from one milestone to another. And the only way I can approach a project like that is to take it block by block.

Tom:

Closing thoughts on the project?

Paul:

Right now, we're a voice at the table. We're in the Supportive Housing Network, we are in the supportive housing business and we intend to be champions for survivors of domestic violence and for people with physical disabilities. That they can be in our system without needing to be labeled mentally ill.

Tom:

Very Inspiring.

Read the full interview at www.bflnyc.org.

Barrier Free Living Apartments feature: 50 family units for families with a disabled head of household who is a victim/survivor of domestic violence; 70 studio apartments for disabled victims/survivors of domestic violence, men and women with disabilities and veterans with disabilities.

Development Team

*Barrier Free Living
Foxy Management
Alembic Community Development*

Funders

*NYC Department of Housing Preservation & Development (HPD)
NYC Housing Development Corporation (HDC)
NYS Homeless Housing and Assistance Corporation (HHAC)
Citi Community Capital
Richman Housing Resources Corporation for Supportive Housing
NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH)*

Others

*Bronx Borough President's Office
Council Member Maria del Carmen Arroyo
Council Speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito
NYC Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities*

New Start

We had the honor of visiting new Supportive Housing resident LeVar Jeffers in his studio the day he moved in. "I came from the streets. This is a new start to get my life together," says LeVar. Now that he has a safe home, LeVar plans to pursue computer repair school and study martial arts.



BFL's Secret Garden Debuts Domestic Violence Video in American Sign Language



Barrier Free Living's Secret Garden domestic violence program teamed with filmmaker Blake Drummond to create an American Sign Language (ASL) video to share information with Deaf and Hard of Hearing victims of domestic violence.

Supported by the 2012 Office on Violence Against Women Disabilities Grant Program, BFL collaborated with its four grant-funded partners (New York County District Attorney's Office, Harlem Independent Living Center, Crime Victims Treatment Center and CONNECT) to create signed, captioned videos for each agency's website to enhance the accessibility of information to Deaf and Hard of Hearing individuals.

"Filming the ASL videos encouraged the grant-funded partners to think critically about messaging—what's being said, who is saying it, and who is the target audience," says Laura Fidler, Project Director. "The partners worked with Deaf, Hard of Hearing and ASL-fluent professionals to develop messages that are clear, succinct and meaningful for Deaf and Hard of Hearing viewers."

The video, featuring Secret Garden intern Morgane Vincent, explores the dynamics of unhealthy relationships and provides resources for Deaf and Hard of Hearing victims.

"I loved being part of this experience. It was a first time for me, and I learned a lot more than I expected doing the video. I have met people that I wouldn't have met," says Vincent.

Secret Garden team member Nicolyn Plummer was instrumental in guiding the project to completion, working with the entire Secret Garden staff to develop the script. Plummer worked on the ASL translation with Secret Garden's Michelle Reyes.

"It is a privilege and an honor working with the collaborative team to enhance system-wide accessibility for a diverse Deaf community, and understand multi-Deaf culture, as Deaf needs are not homogeneous. It is not one size fits all," says Plummer.

Drummond (who also shot BFL's mission film video) says: "Working with the team at BFL to create the video for Secret Garden's Services for the Deaf was an incredible experience. I hope it raises awareness and aids the underserved Deaf community in finding help if they need it. There's no better feeling for a filmmaker than when a collaboration, such as this video, can enact meaningful change."

View the film at <http://www.bflnyc.org/programs-services/secret-garden/>

Mission & Music

When he's not exploring benefit and housing opportunities for Deaf and Hard of Hearing survivors of domestic violence, Secret Garden Case Manager Caelan Manning is likely jamming on his sax.

Attracted to Barrier Free Living's mission, in particular the agency's powerful work with Deaf and Hard of Hearing survivors, Caelan joined the team this past year and hit the ground running. He took time out from work and music (his passion) to answer a few questions about his first few months at Secret Garden.

Read the interview at www.bflnyc.org/about-us/our-stories/

