

Center hailed for instilling sense of pride

Adults with developmental disabilities thrive in Paramus

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Things are taking shape in a former graphics company off Route 17 in Paramus, where 18 adults with developmental disabilities practice life skills such as answering the telephone, folding laundry and sorting out donations for the nearby Goodwill.

"They love helping out and they're very focused," said Adam Dratch, a counselor.

The P.R.I.D.E. Center is run by ECLC of New Jersey, which has schools in Ho-Ho-Kus and Chatham for students with developmental disabilities. Once the students turn 21 and are too old for the schools, many were at a loss what to do.

Doris Crotty said she checked out at least a dozen programs before signing up her autistic son, Jimmy, at the Paramus center off Sette Drive, which opened last month. "I love it," she said. "When they go out into the community, they have high expectations for these kids. They expect the kids to step up to the plate."

The clients have a range of disabilities including autism, Down syndrome and brain injuries, but they are encouraged to help one another through some of the challenges they face, said Dot Libman, who directs the Paramus and

Chatham programs.

Corey Villareal said his favorite activity is the book club. The group meets at Panera Bread to discuss what the members are reading; this month's selection was "Scat" by Carl Hiaasen. Helen Solano says she likes the bowling trips and lunch at the mall food court.

Clients get out in the community as much as possible, including trips to the YMCA for exercise, and field trips such as a recent jaunt to the Great Falls in Paterson, Garret Mountain and Lambert Castle and the Montclair Art Museum.

The group is excited about its new donated kitchen, which should be completed by Thanksgiving. A washer and dryer are also coming.

There are 359 programs in the state that offer day services, said Pam Ronan, spokeswoman for the Department of Human Services.

"There is a tremendous need for programs like this for people who are out of school," said Barbara Laborim, the grants chair for UNICO, the Italian-American service organization that has donated a defibrillator to the Paramus center. "The care, the love the staff has for the clients — they cannot be paid enough for what they do."