

# Opening homes and hearts to those with disabilities

By KIMBERLY FLAHERTY

Mercy Intellectual Disabilities Services provides many residential options for people with intellectual disabilities. One that few people know about, and one that you can be part of, is Lifesharing. Through this program, people with intellectual disabilities live with unrelated family members. The need may arise when blood relatives die or are no longer physically capable of caring for their family member.

"Lifesharing provides consistency, long-term support and focuses on relationship building between the provider and the individual," according to Susan Troyan, program coordinator.

The arrangement offers companionship, the opportunity to become a contributing member of a family and receive additional individualized attention, and the chance to develop trusting and caring relationships. Once a person has expressed a desire to live in a private home, the integration process begins.

Individuals, couples or families take individuals into their homes and care for their needs. The arrangement is not temporary, so the commitment is significant. To serve as a provider, you must be willing to open your home and your heart. The person will become part of your family and the community in which you live.

One family who has made room in both their home and hearts is the McNemars of the South Hills. After raising their four children and serving as foster parents for many years, eight years ago Richard and Margaret McNemar welcomed Wayne, 41, into their extended family. Wayne, who has an intellectual disability, is "always on the go" according to the McNemars. During the day, Wayne attends Mercy Intellectual Disabilities Services adult training facility in Baldwin.

"After so many babies and children, caring for an adult came easy to us," says Margaret. "One of the most important things for Wayne is that we maintain consistency in his schedule. And he knows he is part of our family."

Mercy Behavioral Health and Mercy Intellectual Disabilities Services, part of the Pittsburgh Mercy Health System, have a long history of providing services to people in need in our community. In addition to Mercy employees who provide any needed support, a family living specialist visits once or twice monthly to verify that all regulations and



The McNemar family at St. Thomas More Church in Bethel Park. Front row: Margaret and Wayne. Back row: Mario (foster son), Richard and Father Michael Suslowicz.

expectations are met.

In Pennsylvania, Lifesharing officially began in 1982 when one family opened their home to a person with a disability. At that time, it was called "Family Living." Since then, the program has expanded to almost every county in the commonwealth. More than 1,500 individuals with disabilities participate statewide.

Twenty individuals participate in the Lifesharing program offered by Mercy Intellectual Disabilities Services. They range in age from children to senior citizens who live with families in Allegheny, Beaver, Fayette, and Washington counties.

"There is nothing like seeing the bond blossom between the family members of the participant and the future provider," according to Troyan.

"It's so rewarding," says Richard. "We help Wayne, and in turn, he gives us his love and trust."

To learn more about the Lifesharing Program, call Troyan at 412-344-6415 or contact Mercy Intellectual Disabilities Services at 412-344-6400.

Flaherty is public relations coordinator for Mercy Behavioral Health.

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