

# The Philadelphia Inquirer

OPINION

## In a town that welcomes people who are different, they have found jobs and homes of their own

Updated: July 12, 2019 - 5:22 PM



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ANTHONY PEZZOTTI / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Like other young people, Michael Franolich and Zack Pastore enjoy Collingswood's welcoming vibe, lively downtown, and convenience. They like walking to work, catching a PATCO train to check out the scene in Center City, and hanging out with friends.

"It's pretty interesting ... to *not* live with my parents!" said Franolich, 25, who grew up in Moorestown and works at the Wawa on Haddon Avenue.

“He’s a comedian,” said Pastore, a 23-year-old Monmouth County native. He’s employed at the Tortilla Press restaurant, also on Haddon.

The two friends, who are neighbors, have been living with housemates in Collingswood for nearly a year as members of the Independence Network program offered by JEVS Human Services, a well-regarded Philadelphia nonprofit.

The network provides mentors, job coaches, and other services to disabled young adults, many of whom have been diagnosed as on the autism spectrum. The program was founded eight years ago in Narberth after many parents inquired about such services and was expanded to South Jersey in 2018. Franolich and Pastore are among 10 members in Collingswood and Westmont; an additional 13 people are on the South Jersey waiting list, and there are 29 members in Narberth.

“They must be willing to work, to continue their education, or to become an active volunteer in the community,” Jill C. Gromen, the network’s director of operations, said. “We don’t want to see people languishing in their homes.”



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Michael Franolich, 25, stocks the coffee station at Wawa in Collingswood, where he has worked for about a year. The 25-year-old Moorestown native lives in Collingswood and is a member of the JEVS Independence Network.

As many of us know or can remember, getting started can be tough. It can be even tougher for a young adult with Asperger's, like Zack, or a learning disability, like Mike. They and their peers may need the budgeting, food shopping, cooking, cleaning, or other life-skills guidance that the Independence Network provides.

JEVS connects members with Realtors who help them find apartments or rental houses to share, and some members can qualify for housing subsidies. "We don't provide housing, but we do help our members be good tenants," said Gromen. And for high-functioning adults who have aged out of assistance programs for disabled people under 21, she added, "we can be a stepping-stone, or a lifelong solution for them and their families."

Franolich's parents, Mike and Ellen, said their son tended to spend too much time in his room when he was living with them.

"I wanted him to be free," said Mike, a former newspaper colleague of mine. "I wanted him to have the same dreams I had when I got out on my own."

Said Ellen: "Every parent wants their child to have their own life. It's great to call our son and ask him what's going on, and he says, 'I have plans.' A few years ago, he was waiting for us to decide what to do. Now he has friends."

He also has two jobs: as a teacher's assistant at a Mount Laurel day care and the Wawa gig, where Michelle Goree is his boss.

Mike and another JEVs member employed at the store are willing to work hard and, much like any employee, get "a sense of purpose and pride" from having a job, said Goree, the store manager.

"They're making a contribution that benefits the business, and the community," she said.

David "Buddy" Alaimo, a mentor for Franolich and Pastore, grew up with a sister who is disabled. "I love seeing people make progress," he said. "One of the biggest things was after I took Mike on the PATCO to Eighth and Market, and showed him how to use it, a week later he told me he'd done so by himself. That was incredibly rewarding."

Franolich said, wryly, that it was "a little exciting" to take the train solo, especially the part about getting back on to get back to Collingswood. But he enjoys the freedom of hopping on a train to and from the city.

"I do so myself. Quite frequently," said Pastore.

"Yesterday me and some other people and Zack went to Philadelphia, to Spruce Street Harbor, and got something to eat," Franolich said. "I'm pretty busy."

A regular schedule of social and other events helps build community among the members, and connect members to the larger community, said Gromen. Members have volunteered at the

[Collingswood Farmers Market](#) and at the borough's annual [Book Festival](#), or joined the [Collingswood Community Chorus](#).

“Collingswood has embraced us,” said Gromen.

Anyone who has ever felt alone or different — rather a lot us, I imagine — knows how wonderful it is to make one’s way, make friends, and feel a part of things at last.

“I just feel like I’ve found my place,” said Pastore.

“I’ve been looking for that place for a long time.”



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Zack Pastore, 23, (left) and Michael Franolich, 25, on the front porch of Zack’s home in Collingswood. They are members of the JEVs Independence Network, which helps disabled young adults live independent lives in South Jersey and in Montgomery County.