

Since being founded in 1977, the nonprofit Family Residences and Essential Enterprises, Inc. (FREE) has been helping local residents with intellectual and developmental disabilities, mental illness, and traumatic brain injuries realize their full potential through a variety of services that include employment and housing.

We recently spoke with Stephanie Lewis, FREE's assistant vice president of vocational services, about its plans for National Disability Employment Awareness Month, the organization's 41st anniversary celebration, and its mission.

Q: What plans does FREE have to celebrate National Disability Employment Awareness Month in October?

Stephanie Lewis: Every year, we participate in the annual celebration held at the Heritage Club at Bethpage in Farmingdale. This time, it will be held October 5.

Q: What's it like to be celebrating your 41st year?

SL: We are honored and privileged to be celebrating our 41st anniversary. The Celebration of Life Gala is our signature fundraising event and we are so grateful to those who support our mission. This special evening pays tribute to exceptional leaders and humanitarian partners who are dedicated to the support and services FREE provides and have made outstanding contributions to our community. The gala will be held October 18 at The Mansion at Oyster Bay in Woodbury.



Stephanie Lewis

Q: What is the goal of FREE's employment programs?

SL: To support all individuals with disabilities to achieve independent, self-determined lives through employment. FREE's employment programs provide services to people ranging from those who are just starting

the employment process, to those who are already placed and in need of support to help them maintain employment. In our Pathways to Employment program, we provide vocational assessment and work readiness services through a series of mini-internship experiences for each individual. Once a person is ready for job development and placement services, they are referred to our Supported Employment Programs, so they can receive one-on-one support.

Q: When did FREE start and who founded it?

SL: FREE was founded in 1977 by a group of parents and advocates in response to the need for community residential alternatives to institutionalization. FREE supports more than 4,000 individuals with intellectual/developmental disabilities, mental illness, and traumatic brain injury. FREE provides a diverse array of support and services including housing, recovery services, transition to work, employment, day, community and family services, respite, crisis services, education and afterschool support, specialty health services, and advocacy.

Q: What is the mission of your organization?

SL: To help individuals of all abilities realize their full potential.

Q: What is your favorite part of what you do?

SL: It is most rewarding to support people with special needs to achieve their vocational goals. Most of the people in my programs never even thought about employment, let alone included it in their personal goals. When they finally do achieve success, they and their families are so excited and fulfilled, and it's incredibly rewarding to be even the smallest part of their journeys.

Q: How did you get started in this field?

SL: Most of my prior direct-service work was with children with special needs, and my goal was to support their achievement of self-determined lives. After working in the field for a short amount of time, I saw that I was able to help individuals achieve their dreams in a unique and special way, and I immediately became committed to supporting employment services.

Q: What is the biggest challenge of your job?

SL: Advocating for new employment opportunities within the community. It typically takes some time and education to help employers understand the genuine rewards available to them if they hire individuals with disabilities within their workforce.

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Daniel works at FREEdom Farm in Brentwood, a partnership between Family Residences and Essential Enterprises and the Sisters of St. Joseph. He participates in a wide variety of vigorous outdoor activity throughout the year including preparing beds, build irrigation systems, sow seeds, and set transplants, weeding, mowing, tilling the land, and harvesting the vegetables.



Family Residences and Essential Enterprises, Inc.



Tim works in the hospitality industry in the community at Residence Inn Marriott, Central Islip.