

## At 72, she's tickled pink with independence

By Erin Smith, [esmith@lowellsun.com](mailto:esmith@lowellsun.com)

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DRACUT — Brenda Taylor loves pink. She picked out her pink bedspread. She also chose the pink paint for the walls of her bedroom — the first bedroom the 72-year-old hasn't had to share with someone else. Before several months ago, Taylor, who is developmentally disabled and confined to a wheelchair, had spent 16 years living in the same nursing home.

At the new group home on Hildreth Street for developmentally and intellectually disabled residents, the staff takes Taylor to get her hair done, grocery shopping and on walks around the surrounding streets to meet her new neighbors — all freedoms that weren't possible when she was living at a nursing home, according to staff and Taylor's family.

"I'm very happy here," said Taylor, a Lowell native who likes to read large-print Agatha Christie mystery novels.

Taylor and other residents are encouraged to seek out more independence, even if it's a small step, such as buttering a slice of toast, said Kelly Johnson, chief operations officer for Bridgewell, a Lynnfield-based nonprofit that runs Taylor's new home and two similar group homes in Dracut.

"Everyone deserves the opportunity to live in the community, lead a more self directed life and be more engaged in their community just like the rest of us," said Johnson.

The new quarter-million dollar Hildreth Street home, which can accommodate five residents, is equipped with extra wide doors for the wheelchair bound, walk-in closets in each bedroom and medical equipment, such as a robotic arm lift to help move residents from a wheelchair into bed. The bathrooms are equipped with shower chairs and the flooring is a special surface that prevents slipping and proves extremely durable for shower beds and wheelchairs. The home also has an oversized garage to house the handicapped van that staff members use to take residents to doctor's appointments and on outings into the community. Three residents have already moved in the new home, which opened at the end of June.

In the past, these group homes weren't always as easy to establish because of the stigma surrounding those with disabilities.

"Very fortunately, we see that less and less. Neighbors do tend to have questions and we are more than happy to answer them. Some people may be uninformed that people with developmental disabilities can live in the community with the right staff support. You just run into people here and there that believe they should still be in institutions, but that's rare fortunately," said Johnson, who said the neighbors of the new Dracut home have been very welcoming.

Maria Vega, program director at the house, said the new home is an adjustment for the residents who aren't used to having so much personal freedom, especially during mealtime when the residents enjoy items from their own kitchen as compared to food supplied by nursing home dining halls.



Brenda Taylor, right, shown with her sister Joanne Talty, says she enjoys living at Bridgewell. (Photo Credit: Sun/Bob Whitaker)

"It's an adjustment. They sometimes still ask permission to get food from the refrigerator. They ask, 'Can I get a snack?' and I say, 'Of course, this your home.'" We're trying to get them used to going into the kitchen and think about what they want to eat and how they can make snacks," said Vega.

Vega said there are at least three staff members at the home at all times to assist the residents with cooking, cleaning, doctor's visits and social activities.

Taylor said she wasn't sure she wanted to move out of the nursing home at first. But then she visited another group home, toured the house and the resident's rooms and stayed for dinner.

"Everyone there seemed very happy," said Taylor.

It also helps that Anna Sawtelle, Taylor's roommate and friend from the nursing home, decided to move to the Hildreth Street group home.

Taylor regularly plays bingo with Sawtelle, who decorated her room with a life size cardboard cutout of Elvis and loves watching the rocker's movies.

"It became more and more apparent it was a nice opportunity and a better quality of life," said Joanne Talty, Taylor's youngest sister, who helped Taylor decorate her room with her husband Mike. "Plus, it makes Brenda happy, which is what's important."

The Bridgewell program is funded through a partnership with the state Department of Developmental Services.