

I was in a black hole. Today, I smile a lot more.

PAT'S STORY

Since moving into Vinfen's new group residence in Haverhill for individuals with brain injuries (BI) and mental health conditions in March 2023, Pat has found more than just a place to live—she's found a home. "It's really the closest thing to living in your own home—and where else could I live and get to pick on the program director every day?" she jokes, her contagious laugh echoing through the house, bringing warmth to both staff and housemates alike.

There wasn't much joy in Pat's previous living situation. Coming to the Vinfen BI house—as most residents do—from a long-term nursing care facility, Pat dealt with the trauma of losing dozens of housemates during the COVID-19 pandemic. As she anxiously waited for her name to make its way to the top of a placement list to move out of the facility, Pat served as the president of the resident council and tried to find solace for herself and others by creating a memorial COVID garden, featuring rocks painted with the names of those who'd been lost.

It took three years for Pat to get the call that there was a spot open at the new Vinfen house, and she quickly found a home that supported her and her goals. The first of those goals? "I had dreamed that when I came here I could get a cat—I've always loved cats," she says. "So, we worked out a plan for how it could work, and then went and rescued a beautiful black cat named Abby. She's become a part of the house."

Pat also became a member of Vinfen's Point After Clubhouse (PAC) in Lawrence, where she goes most days to be part of a close community and engage in various activities. "I love it there. We get to explore our creativity. We have a gallery space where members can display their art—I do abstract painting and collage-making. We also have a jug band, and we sometimes go around to nursing homes and entertain residents."

Never reluctant to share her opinions and speak up for her fellow Vinfen service recipients ("I'm no shrinking violet," she laughs), Pat is working with the PAC's grant writer to raise funds for a second accessible van to transport members who, like herself, are confined to wheelchairs. She is also part of an advisory council that meets regularly with Vinfen's Board of Directors. "We're there to be the voice of people served and give recommendations."

It took her time to find it, but Pat says she's now in a place that offers safety, community, and much more of the joy she sought for so long. "Let's put it this way," she says, "I was in a black hole. Today, I smile a lot more."



JOEY'S STORY

Since his early childhood years, Joey, 31, has dealt with isolation and loneliness due to a variety of mental health conditions. Beginning at the age of 3, he experienced the terrifying effects of Charles Bonnet Syndrome, a condition that caused him to see bright lights and hallucinations. As he grew older, his battles expanded to include depression, anxiety, and a seizure disorder. Discovering his homosexuality only deepened his sense of alienation as he faced rejection from his peers.

"I never really had many friends," Joey says. "People thought I was a freak."

A pattern of self-harm developed, including suicide attempts. As an adult, Joey was officially diagnosed with schizophrenia, and not long after that, he moved with his father to Cape Cod. There, a therapist recommended that he consider joining Vinfen's Cove Clubhouse in Harwichport.

"When I came to Cove, I quickly found myself feeling stronger," Joey says. "I really wanted to make connections, and I was immediately welcomed here. I found myself making family, not just friends. When I was sad, I always had someone to talk to. The clubhouse is a place where you can share just about everything and feel accepted and brave."

Through the Club, Joey started seeing a Vinfen peer specialist, who could talk to him about his struggles with socialization. The result, he says, was "I became more accepting of myself. I was gaining more confidence, ambition, hope, and acceptance, which was what I needed for future social interactions."

Today, as an active Clubhouse member, Joey enjoys the group activities and camaraderie, including the regular outings and excursions that the group takes part in. He has become very interested in spirituality, and leads a meditation group for the members. And he's also found himself embracing his skill for, and love of, writing. Several times a week, Joey assembles short Club newsletters. "It's a mix of information relevant to the Club, fun stuff, and just anything I think people will find interesting," he says. In addition, Joey has recently finished his first book of original poetry, titled *You Let Me Breathe: Uplifting Poems*.

Joey credits much of his personal growth to the community he's found at Cove. "I think that this is a place that shows encouragement and care. They really listen and are helpful, and open to doing what each person needs to take steps forward—big or small. Here we can be whoever we feel like being, and that's the magic to it."

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TODD'S STORY

Before finding Vinfen, Todd's life in a group residence for men with developmental disabilities was marked by constant challenges. He grappled with impulse control, struggled to

manage his finances, and found it difficult to keep his Type 2 diabetes in check. The weight of these struggles left him feeling overwhelmed and uncertain about the future.

"I moved into a Vinfen respite residence for about eight months, and in that time, I really made positive strides," Todd says. "I had more staff supervision and support with all my challenges. I was able to manage my spending better, and got help with taking my meds on a regular basis and eating regularly and appropriately."

In 2015, Todd moved into a permanent Vinfen residence—where he still lives today—and began attending day programs at Vinfen's Employment Training Center (ETC) in Somerville, where he's had the opportunity to learn a host of independent life skills and receive vocational training. "I've been connected to different paid work opportunities using the kitchen and custodial skills I've learned at ETC," Todd says. "I've even had the opportunity to take part in the specialized relief program and become a full-fledged employee at Vinfen, doing work for the HR department."

Perhaps the most empowering development for Todd, however, has been in finding his voice as a self-advocate—taking on the responsibility of speaking up for himself, and his fellow individuals served, in settings both within and outside Vinfen. "Basically, it's about taking the opportunity to give my opinions on what will help me and other residents live better and more successfully. And if I ever feel something isn't right, I can tell somebody about it, and ask why it happens to be that way and how to change it."

Todd is the human rights advocate for his house and has been named chairperson of the Metro Boston Self-Advocacy Group. He's presented at the Mass Advocates Standing Strong (MASS) annual conference and the North Shore Legislative Advocacy event, before state advocate organizations like the Arc of Massachusetts, and at various events at the State House, to help influence lawmakers to support those who receive human services and those who provide them.

"The more I speak in public, the more comfortable I am," Todd says. "You get used to people paying attention to you."

Overall, Todd considers it just one of the significant advances he's made since coming to Vinfen. "Basically, it's been a huge help to my independence," he says. "I feel like I get to participate in stuff I missed out on earlier in my life. Not having independence means not being able to do things you love. Now, with the support of the staff here and the skills I've learned, I've been able to retrain myself, make friends, and gain the trust of the people around me."

MAYA'S STORY

Maya is a spirited 14-year-old girl who lives with a number of significant challenges: autism, epilepsy, speech and hearing deficits, and a rare genetic disorder known as IQSEC2—of which there are less than 500 known cases in the world. For her parents, Barbara and Mark, finding the array of supports they needed for Maya was a monumental task.

“Given Maya’s complex combination of diagnoses, we never fit anywhere,” Barbara says. “When you have a child with a disability, it’s overwhelming in so many ways, but something you’re not prepared for is how hard it can be to get them the services and resources they need,” Barbara says, the emotion audible in her voice. “I’ve been fighting for Maya since she was 9 months old, and Vinfen was the first place that was willing to take on the fight for me.”

For the last 7 years, Maya has received Vinfen services through our Autism Support Center (ASC) and Family Support Center (FSC). She and her family also participate in the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) and Department of Developmental Services (DDS) Residential Prevention Program, through which Maya receives in-home visits from Vinfen clinicians who help develop and update an individualized care plan, teach Maya life skills, and facilitate what the family may need at any given time to support her current needs.

In addition to these supports, Barbara says that Maya’s participation in the ASC’s monthly activities for families have had a profound effect on bolstering her socialization skills. “She’s attended monthly movie nights where Vinfen reserves a theater just for us, outdoor programs in the park, and more—and she’s gotten accustomed to seeing the same kids over and over again,” Barbara says. “And through that repeated exposure, Maya has learned to recognize them. She knows and remembers people she’s met, and will keep pictures of them in her communication device. So, now when we go to activities, the kids can sit together. It builds interaction, a little bit of independence, and a community for the kids.”

That sense of community is a huge part of what the Family Support Center offers. “I can call Sethany (Griffin, director of Family Support Services) or anyone on her team with questions about anything,” Barbara says. “It’s just support when we need it—they’ll come to school meetings with us, or even just listen to us vent, or cry, or celebrate milestones. And, we have a monthly parent support group, where we’re all able to do that for each other—as Maya has grown, I’m now in a position to help parents of younger children. I’ve been lifted up, and now I can help do the lifting for others.”

Barbara says that, over the years, Vinfen has been there and ready to help with everything from negotiating the bureaucratic process of getting schools to provide Maya with the accommodations she needs, to accessing all the adaptive equipment and personal care supplies that she’s eligible to receive. “When we came to Vinfen, Sethany told me ‘You tell me what you need—it’s our job to figure out how to get it for you,’” Barbara says. “It was somebody finally telling me they were here to help us—and, at this point, we don’t even think of the Vinfen team as Vinfen. They’re Maya’s family.”



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