

Leaving Home: An Interview with Jackie Kenley

by Myrna Medina, Family Specialist

Jackie Kenley was a family support specialist for CDBS for many years. The following are some of her thoughts on the transition of her daughter Laura, aged 26 and who has CHARGE syndrome, to supported living, based upon an interview I had with Jackie in August of this year.

Myrna: Jackie, I've heard that your daughter Laura is doing really well since moving from your home in February of 2009 to a private residence with supported living services. I understand that she has recently moved from there to The Arc of San Francisco's apartments near Fisherman's Wharf. I also see that you seem to be doing well with this big change in your life.

As you well know, my role as a family specialist is to provide technical assistance and support to parents and family members. I believe your story will be very inspirational to all parents including myself. For many of us, it's scary to think about our sons and daughters growing up to adulthood, so that it seems premature to talk about independent living. Even though many of the children that we serve are currently young, it is important to think about what the future is going to look like. That's why I wanted to interview you today. So, Jackie, could you please share your experience about Laura's transition to adult life as well as her move out of your home and into independent living.

Jackie: As you know, Myrna, we dreamed and hoped and actually worked on Laura's plan for supported living for years. We began by doing a "Future's Plan" when she was in high school and thought about what a great home for Laura would look like. We also kept putting plans for supported living in her IPP (Individual Program Plan) when we wrote it each year and kept reminding our Regional Center that this was a goal for Laura in her adult life. I guess by talking about this and working towards this goal, our family began to see this as a reality. However when the moment of her actually moving into her own home came about—well, it took some emotional transition time for us—especially for MOM!

Myrna: What helped you make the decision to go ahead with this process?

Jackie: The Arc of San Francisco, where Laura had begun having adult services through a day program, took this supported living plan very seriously and did an assessment of her needs, an assessment of what her staff would look like and began sending me to look at possible housing. The Regional Center also sent me to see some group homes but I could not see Laura living in any of the places that I visited. San Francisco has not had Section 8 housing openings for years

and we were not able to even get Laura on the Section 8 waiting list so we began looking at renting a private property and talked with the Arc and Regional Center about how to fund it. The Arc spent many hours carefully putting the funding plan together- including how many hours for each service - and began hiring staff. When we finally found a place the staff was already hired so it was then or not for a long time. The process sort of took on a life of its own and I had to step up to the emotional plate, so to speak, and let this happen.

Myrna: How did you start this process?

Jackie: The process started years ago in our minds and as I said with her “Future’s Plan” as part of her IPPs. However the actual process started by talking to Regional Center and finding a program that could actually manage and staff the supported living. When we found the Arc (after one less positive attempt with another agency), the needs assessment process began.

Myrna: How did you prepare yourself for this transition? How did you prepare Laura?

Jackie: Laura got to know her staff through some of them working in our family home and her day program at the Arc. We visited the house and she was part of the move on the days of moving furniture, etc., so she got to know her surroundings. In her latest move, I was really surprised at how she adapted so quickly and made herself “at home”.

I spent the night with Laura in her new home and spent time with her staff. I also spent and still spend time with her staff and especially her supported living manager. We have monthly staff meetings in Laura’s new apartment. Still, it felt really strange after 24 years of her living under the same roof as her family to have her someplace else. Now when she comes home for visits or overnights she will eventually go and sit at the front door-letting us know she is ready to go to her HOME!

Myrna: What do you wish someone had told you early on about supported living for your daughter?

Jackie: To trust my wonderful daughter and to trust all the effort her teams have put into practice all these years. To know that she like our other children wants to spread her wings and be an adult.

Myrna: What surprised you about this process? What did you learn?

Jackie: I learned just how smart Laura is and that she was quite capable of change and our trust. I learned that she just like our other children was ready to have her own life as an adult.