

# Mid-Hudson

## Donors add smiles to those with autism

### Greystone Programs seen as 'godsend' for many on spectrum

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POUGHKEEPSIE JOURNAL

For Audrey Walker, Greystone Programs was a godsend for her daughter, Leslie.

The 51-year-old from Verbank has been attending programs offered by the Poughkeepsie-based nonprofit for more than 20 years.

Activities such as horseback riding, yoga and art therapy — all offered by Greystone Programs — have given Leslie a sense of belonging despite her developmental disability, her mother said.

"Before attending the programs she was frustrated because she could not communicate," Walker said of her daughter. "Now, her personality has changed. She is really, really happy. She's learning new ways to communicate every day."

A privately-run, nonprofit organization based in Poughkeepsie, Greystone Programs provides art therapy and essential services such as housing to more than 500 children and adults with autism and other developmental disabilities in the Hudson Valley.

Peter Robitaille, 56, has been participating in the program since 1985. Robitaille's sister, Paula, said without the program, she would not be able to see her brother each week.

Robitaille said. "It was either that or institutionalize him after my mother could no longer take care of him. What Greystone did is they offered him a place in New York state, in our family's town, where he had spent most of his life and where he lives today. Visiting him is not an event but something I can do weekly."

While essential programs such as housing and health care are funded through the federal and state government, enriching programs such as art, speech and language classes are largely funded through fundraisers sponsored by the nonprofit. At Sunday's 26th annual International Wine Showcase and Auction, more than 250 people bid on auction items to raise money for those services.

Paintings on display at the event were created at Greystone by residents and program participants.

"Art allows clients to be able to express themselves and showcase their talents that may be otherwise overlooked," event organizer Michelle Hathaway said. "They may not be able to speak but they can communicate through art. It makes a difference in their lives and brings a smile to their faces every day."

Walker's daughter, who lives at Greystone's Harmony Hill in Pawling, said she is happy to know that her daughter not only has a home she can share with her peers, but also a place where she can grow and thrive.

"I won't be here forever," Walker said. "I know that when I am gone that Leslie will be in a good place."

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