FIRST PLACE AZ PARTNERS WITH COX COMMUNICATIONS TO OPEN THE DOORS TO A NEW WAY OF LIVING FOR THOSE WITH AUTISM

Article Teresa K. Traverse  Photography Stephen G. Dreiseszun

Denise Resnik is dedicated to providing solutions. When her son Matthew was diagnosed with autism 23 years ago, Resnik set out to learn as much as she could about the developmental disorder, and quickly realized that she couldn’t do it alone. So, she co-founded the Southwest Autism Research & Resource Center (SARRC) three years after her
son was born. And naturally, as any mother would, she started thinking about his fate from the get-go.

"I’ve been dreaming about what will happen when the school bus stops coming almost from the day it arrived; and it was a very natural place for me to go to think about where Matthew is going to live and who’s going to support him," she says. "I remember visiting some of the properties [for people with special needs] early on, and I also remember running away as fast as I possibly could. I didn’t want to see the future, I didn’t want to see that future."

That’s when she decided to take fate into her own hands and make her son’s future brighter. SARRC, the Urban Land Institute and Arizona State University joined forces to research more than 100 different residential properties for young adults like Matthew. However, during her search, she either came across places that were 100-percent supported by the government or by charity, and neither option appealed to her. So, Resnik brought the public, private and charitable sectors together and founded First Place AZ in 2012—a sister nonprofit to SARRC that seeks to provide individuals with special needs with housing and a supportive community environment.

First Place-Phoenix is the first in a collection of properties that are slated to start appearing all over the country. The 54-apartment building is located at 3rd Street and Catalina in Downtown Phoenix, giving residents access to the light rail, employment and post-secondary opportunities. An on-site leadership institute will also be dedicated to advancing public policy to create more options for those with disabilities.

And private companies have recently taken note. As of September 2016, Cox Communications is First Place’s exclusive telecommunications partner.

“They’re providing us with grant money for technology that can be used to help individuals live more independently and allow us to train and educate more direct support service providers,” Resnik says. “We can open doors to more options for more people with special needs.”

Many people with disabilities lose a support system after their formal education has ended. As a result of this, the “group of individuals with autism slide backwards at a far greater rate than any other disability group,” she says. But First Place hopes to change that.

“The most important thing for our residents is that they have a home. A place where they can be themselves. They can learn. They can be safe,” Resnik says. “Also, where their families can benefit from peace of mind, knowing that their sons and daughters are happy, have friends and have a community that supports them.”

First Place-Phoenix is slated to open in early 2018, and Resnik hopes the community may serve as a blueprint for other future properties.

“It will have an impact throughout Arizona,” she says. “And we hope across the country.”

For more information, please visit, FirstPlaceAZ.org.