

**I**t was an exciting time for a social, outgoing young woman. Jenny Maertens had just graduated from high school. But anticipation was quickly replaced by frustration.

When Jenny graduated this past May, she was no longer a child with a disability—she was an adult with a disability. This meant there were limited age-appropriate programs or services available for the 21-year-old in her hometown of Cooperstown.

The choices presented to her and her family were not that appealing. Jenny could move away from her mom, her dad, a handful of siblings, a grandma, and the only community she had ever known, or remain in Cooperstown and receive no help.

“She was on a waiting list for a group home in Valley City for years,” explained Jenny’s mom, Sharon. “With nothing opening up as far as a group home, what was she going to do? There is nothing available here because we live in a small town. So, basically, she would sit at home while we were at work.”

Jenny was born with a cognitive disability. Though she possesses wonderful qualities and many abilities that allow her to perform a wide variety of tasks, she does require some assistance.

The family did have some help as Jenny’s grandmother lived next door. This gave Jenny a place to stay where there was supervision during the day. But staying with her grandma was not a viable long-term option. Many days were spent in front of the television or computer. Jenny wasn’t productive, wasn’t spending time with people her own age, and wasn’t getting the kind of specific care she required.

### Getting Help

A meeting in May—attended by Jenny’s special education director, Mary Stammen, and staff from the Anne Carlsen Center—proved to be life-changing for Jenny.

“The Anne Carlsen Center was at the meeting and telling people

about their outreach program,” said Stammen. “The next day I called them and told them I have a woman who is in need of adult services. They got in touch with Jenny’s parents and, in a very short while, put together living and working schedules that were very satisfying for the family.”

“Jenny’s mom expressed a desire for apartment living,” said Gina Horgan, a Family Resource Coordinator with the Anne Carlsen Center. “She had been told that wasn’t possible and that her daughter was going to live in group homes.”

In some regards, Jenny’s situation may have been easier if she required more highly-specialized care. Had she qualified for those services, she might have been able to receive help right away. Instead, it was determined that Jenny would function well in a group-care setting. Unfortunately, there were no other individuals with similar needs in the immediate area.

### Putting the Pieces into Place

Jenny has a larger-than-life personality. She seeks out conversation and connections with other people. Her mother says that was the most discouraging part about her daughter’s situation. Jenny is someone who could create a fulfilling life, if just given the chance.

“It is fun working right now,” said Jenny. “Oh yeah, it is really fun. I make coffee and do towels and washcloths. And I walk the dogs and lots of stuff.”

“Now she is living in her home community and has a lot of support,” said Stammen. “That is all very good for her.”

ACC staff met with Jenny and her family at the end of August, crafting schedules that would play to the young adult’s strengths and

get her involved in her community. ACC Community Program Coordinator Laurie Skadsem visited businesses in Cooperstown and found a variety of employers eager to work with Jenny.

“Jenny has several volunteer opportunities in Cooperstown—for example at the nursing home,” Skadsem said. “She goes to each room there, knocks on the door, and then goes in and changes out towels and washcloths. She sets up the coffee area at one of the banks in town. She has the ability to do a variety of tasks at the various businesses.”

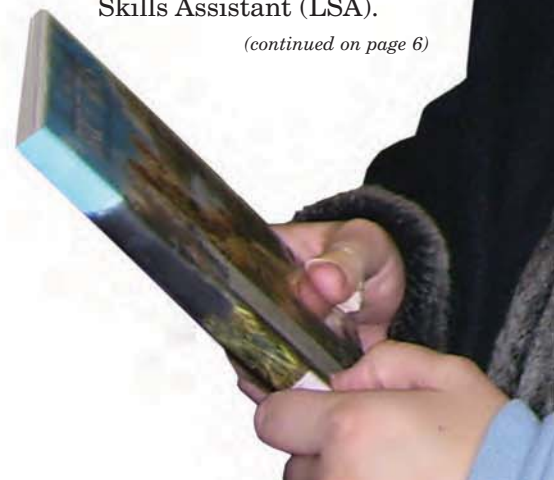
“I tried adding incentives at each business and, of course, social interaction,” Skadsem added. “At the nursing home, if she finishes with the towels and washcloths by 11 A.M., Jenny joins the exercise group there. Then from 11:30 A.M. to 1 P.M., she makes her own lunch, cleans up, and gets ready for her afternoon schedule.”

“We try to work with a client’s strengths and preferences,” said Horgan. “Jennifer likes animals, for example, so we put her in contact with a veterinarian office, and she walks dogs there each morning.”

“The program is individualized,” Skadsem said. “We don’t say we’ll make a program only in Jamestown. We say, ‘Where do you live?’”

The final piece of the puzzle fell into place when Amber Olson was considered to be Jenny’s Life Skills Assistant (LSA).

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# Close *to* Home

ACC Opens Doors  
of Opportunity  
for Cooperstown  
Woman



Jenny Maertens and her LSA Amber Olson look through books and movies at the library.

Jenny spreads frosting over a cake. With supervision, she is able to bake at her apartment.



Jenny selects towels from a closet while at her apartment. She visits the apartment during the day to rest between activities and learn new skills.

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LSAs assist someone in performing everyday tasks, and they administer health and personal cares during therapeutic, educational, vocational, recreational and leisure activities.

“I help individuals get to know their community and communities to get to know individuals,” said Olson.

Olson, who graduated from high school with Jenny’s older sister before earning a bachelor’s degree in nutrition, was living in Cooperstown and had just been hired by ACC in August. She was planning to move to Jamestown to cut down on the commute, but when the opportunity to work with Jenny was created, that all changed. Amber could now work for ACC and remain in Cooperstown.

“It is a great program—I fully believe in it,” said Olson. “With it, you don’t have to uproot anyone from their community. And you can tell the community is 100-percent behind Jenny. When they see her, they always smile and say hi and ask her how it is going. They are thrilled.”

“Amber is spectacular,” said Sharon. “She cares about Jennifer, and she is so amazing.”

Olson also gets approval from the most important person in the process—Jenny.

“Oh yeah, Amber is a good person,” said Jenny. “We do a lot of work and play during breaks. We play some card games or talk.”

### **A Life with a Living Space**

With Jenny’s support team in place, her family found an apart-

ment for rent. The space is all Jenny’s, and is a kind of reward for all of her hard work. During the day she goes to various places in Cooperstown, spending her time volunteering and interacting. Time is built into each day in which she can visit her apartment to enjoy some downtime or, with Amber’s assistance, learn important skills such as cooking and cleaning.

Furnishing Jenny’s apartment became much easier when a thrift store, run in conjunction with the Special Education program in Portland, N.D., gave Jenny a hand.

“Amber and Jennifer took a trip to Portland, and Jennifer got to go through the store and pick out what she wanted,” said Sharon. “Jennifer was so excited once she and Amber got the stuff put up in the apartment. She just walked around and said, ‘What do you think, Mom? What do you think?’ She was so excited about all the things she had gotten.”

Jenny’s church also celebrated the new apartment, throwing her an apartment shower in October. The church is just one of many organizations in Cooperstown that have welcomed Jenny’s hard work and accepted her as a productive member of their community.

“The community itself has been so open to Jennifer,” said Sharon. “She has so many places where she can work, and that has been very heart-warming. All of the businesses are so open to her coming there.”

Although many of the changes in Jennifer’s life have been positive, not every day is perfect.

“There were a few bumps along the way. I’m here to guide her and push her a little bit when she needs it,” said Olson. “But we have worked through it. She knows that number one, I’m here for her and that she can always come to me and ask me questions.”

### **Looking to the Future**

Jenny’s parents hope eventually their daughter can live with a roommate, though she will probably always require a certain amount of support. However, having a roommate would allow her a greater measure of independence during evenings and weekends.

And hopefully, this success story acts as a springboard for others.

“I’m very, very pleased with the staff support. It has been wonderful,” said Sharon of the ACC staff. “They have really made it feel like getting Jennifer in a program is a high priority. I hope Jennifer is cutting a path for others. It is so valuable for her as a person. They have really done something, and with the community being so open, I have to give Cooperstown a lot of credit, too.”

A chance at a productive, fulfilling life is something the Center believes is every individual’s right.

“Every kid at her age is expected to leave home and branch out on their own,” added Sharon. “The Anne Carlsen Center is giving Jennifer the ability to do that, just like anyone else.”