

Much as we might
have wanted Megan to remain within the
loving cocoon of our family home,
we believed that she could far better
expand her social development and
community integration in a group setting.



A Different Kind of

By Anne Lang

Recently, we moved our 21-year-old daughter into a state-supported group home for adults with special needs. While she was quite excited to embark on this huge new chapter in her life, my husband and I were left to sort through a roller-coaster range of emotions.

“We raise our children to leave us,” or so the saying goes. And in most families, the going-away stage for neurotypical children usually begins around age 18 – whether it’s time for college, a first apartment and job, far-flung travels, or an early marriage. But what if a child has autism? Do we raise that child to leave, or to stay?

In our family, we raised our daughter Megan to someday leave us, just as we did her older sister, a recent college graduate who now lives and works out of state. In the years following Megan’s autism diagnosis at age three, we gradually came to accept that she simply couldn’t (and arguably shouldn’t) live with us forever. When she reached her 20s, we reasoned that since Megan presumably will outlive us by several decades, it would be best to

make a residential separation sooner rather than later. Much as we might have wanted her to remain within the loving cocoon of our family home, we believed that she could far better expand her social development and community integration in a group setting.

Actually, we had started early in preparing Megan for a future apart from us, though we didn’t always consciously think of it in those terms. Instead, as we would with any child, we wanted Megan to have fun and variety in her life. So for one week each summer, starting at age seven, she attended a special-needs camp near San Antonio. The camp had swimming, horseback riding, crafts, boating, campfires, dances and more. Megan loved it so much that she’d pitch a little fit whenever we came to pick her up, making it clear that a mere week of camp was just not long enough for her.

When Megan was 14, we began looking for special-needs camps with extended sessions. The camp that most closely met our admittedly rigid standards was painfully far from home, in



Leaving

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANNE LANG

Connecticut – but it offered sessions ranging from two to eight weeks. The first summer, Megan went for four weeks and thrived on the program, which included all the activities she'd enjoyed at her previous camp. So the following year, we sent her for the full eight weeks. Although we sorely missed her, she happily repeated that pattern for the next six summers.

It should be noted that in one particular way, Megan is unlike most individuals on the autism spectrum. While many kids with autism and related disorders spiral into sensory overload in situations involving large crowds, loud music or other chaotic activity, Megan has always been drawn to such extreme forms of stimulation. Disney World, shopping malls, theatrical productions, airports, circuses, festivals, concerts...we long ago discovered that we could take Megan anywhere, and so we did. The livelier the scene, the more she liked it.

Given Megan's perpetual thirst for adventure and her extensive sleep-away experience, it wasn't difficult to introduce her to the

notion of living in a group home. We decided to initiate the process during the middle of her final year in public school, feeling that the transition to a group home might be smoother if her weekday agenda continued to include the district's daily life-skills classes (for special-needs students ages 18-22) that she attends on a separate campus.

Our search for exactly the right group-home agency and residence took about a month. Naturally, we were seeking a safe, clean, cheerful, active, respectful environment where Megan would have opportunities for personal growth, additional training in life skills, avenues for supervised employment, and enough on-site and off-site activities to satisfy her desire for all kinds of fun.

We finally found just the right home, with an opening at just the right time: An all-female, six-bed residence that happened to be less than five miles from our house. Megan's required trial run – a four-day visit during which staff and social workers observed her to see if she would fit in with the other residents and the general



routine – was deemed a success, all around. Megan was bouncing exuberantly when I picked her up, and some of the more verbal residents even pleaded with me to let her permanently join their little family.

One week after that visit, we'd finally cleared all the administrative hurdles required for move-in. My husband had to be out of town for work, so I was the one who took Megan shopping for necessities, frequently chatting with her about the ways in which her life was going to change – as well as the comforting ways in which it would stay the same, since she could come home for one overnight stay each week, periodic 72-hour “passes,” a few mini-vacations, and major holidays.

However, it was daunting to realize that as part of the deal, we were totally relinquishing our roles as Megan's caregivers. We would no longer be the ones choosing her schedule, her doctors, her meals, her brand of toothpaste, or even which coat she might wear to school each day. Essentially, we were turning her over to the state's mental-healthcare system – although we're still her legal guardians, an important fact.

Megan, who has low speech capabilities but fairly high cognitive skills, appeared to be elated about the move. She was singing as we loaded the car with items such as her favorite stuffed animals, assorted electronics and family photos. Her excitement tugged at my heart. While I was glad she was looking forward to this enormous life change (which likely didn't carry such a heavy degree of significance, to her), I also was sad to realize how obviously ready she was to leave home.

Well, we had indeed raised her to leave us, right? Yet the sudden reality of Megan's leaving seemed to represent a more poignant milestone than when her sister had left for college. Not that the latter event wasn't bittersweet; of course it was. But we've concluded that the primary difference between the two departures came down to a matter of trust. Our



older daughter, being neurotypical, had reached the phase of maturity where she had trusted her own self enough to fly from the nest. Megan, on the other hand, could only operate at the level of trust that she'd invested in my husband and me, dating back to her infancy.

It dawned on us that during all the trials and errors of raising a child with special needs, evidently we had done at least one thing right: We'd instilled in Megan such a deep level of trust that somehow, beneath the impenetrable cloak of autism, she knew that we would never put her in a bad or scary situation. She knew it long ago when we put her on the school bus for the first time. She knew it when we sent her to camp all those summers. And she knew it when we sent her off to live in this entirely new home.

Yes, we raise our children to leave us,

even the ones with special needs. But if we've done our jobs as parents, hopefully they'll leave with a strong sense of confidence and optimism that will help them evolve into the best young adults they can possibly be, despite their extra challenges. With Megan, only time will tell if this move was the wisest path we could have chosen at this juncture. So far, the arrangement certainly seems to be working out. But those of us she's left behind are struggling to fill the holes her absence has made in our house and in our hearts.

About the Author:

Anne Lang is a freelance journalist who lives in Austin, Texas. This essay originally appeared in the January 12, 2013 edition of the Austin American-Statesman.