

Desiree's Got a New Style

Friends, teachers and family are a few of the ways Desiree describes her Mentors Aida and Daryl Owens – a remarkable couple who have opened their home and their hearts to help Desiree live life to the fullest.

The Owens have worked at Vineland Developmental Center since they were teenagers. Daryl, who was the grounds keeper, is retired now, but if you pass by Vineland's kitchen you'll still find Aida serving up lots of food and smiles. Throughout their twenty-five years at Vineland, the Owens have come to know and love the residents, their families and fellow staff members – and as they moved towards the next chapter of their lives – they searched for ways to continue making a difference in the lives of people with developmental disabilities.

That's when they found New Jersey MENTOR's Host-Home program – a successful shared living option that has helped hundreds of adults throughout the state receive individualized support in private family homes provided by caring Host-Home providers, *known as Mentors*.

Five years ago, the Owens started providing respite for other Mentors. That's when they met Desiree, a young woman with developmental disabilities. Desiree had a difficult time growing up. She had very low self-esteem and struggled to make friends, be responsible and manage her own personal care and hygiene.

When Desiree came to stay with the Owens, she had little respect for herself and others. But after a few short weekends, she was already showing signs of improvement. She was listening more, learning appropriate behaviors and becoming more confident. Desiree's quick progress inspired the Owens, who permanently welcomed Desiree into their home – and into their family.

Their approach was simple: offer her a place to be herself, opportunities to be more independent and constant support and encouragement! The entire Owens family became role models for Desiree and made her feel comfortable so she could learn new skills, such as cooking, cleaning and picking out her own clothes.

Today Desiree is a mature and happy young woman who is able to manage her own medication, travel independently in the community and excel in her day program where she works part-time and earns her own income. Most importantly, Desiree's self-esteem has greatly improved and she is enjoying making new friends and spending time with her Mentor family.



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