

Former Barnes & Noble in Paramus has become poster project for reuse: New Concepts for Living’s state-of-the-art facility

Eager to adapt

From our print edition

By Tom Bergeron (Paramus) - June 26, 2024



The 81,423-square-foot Achievement Center, above, is located in a former Barnes & Noble on Route 17 in Paramus. - Photos courtesy New Concepts for Living

It’s nice to see the variety of elected officials come to the podium at a ribbon-cutting ceremony. After all, buy-in from the municipality is a key driver to economic growth.

It’s better when regular folks steal the show.

Such was the case last week in Paramus, when Kim Catalfamo spoke at the opening of [New Concepts for Living](#), a state-of-the-art day-program center for adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities — adults like her son, Joey, a multiply-disabled 26-year-old with cerebral palsy and a host of other challenges.

The way Catalfamo detailed how the 81,423-square-foot Achievement Center, located in a former Barnes & Noble on Route 17, will help her son — and family — was moving to the hundreds in attendance.

“It is wonderful, as a parent, to know he is safe and happy, creating wonderful memories each day,” she said.

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New Concepts for Living CEO Steve Setteducati, center, cuts ribbon marking the opening of NCFL's facility in Paramus. Standing next to Setteducati, also holding scissors, are Bergen County Executive James Tedesco and Paramus Mayor Chris Di Piazza.

The facility features a 5,500-square-foot "town square," a spacious Main Street and walking paths, as well as life skills training rooms, including a kitchen, supermarket, computer and technology lab, bedroom and laundry room. The center also houses dedicated spaces for recreation, prevocational training, sensory rooms, health and wellness screenings and therapeutic services such as physical, occupational, behavioral and speech therapy.

More than that, the New Concepts for Living model comes with a philosophy of helping each and every adult participate fully in life. Daily trips out into the community are part of the program.

For Catalfamo, who has seen her share of special needs facilities, it was a delightful difference-maker she never thought she'd find.

"As a mom and adaptivity educator, I knew from Day One that, with Joey's cerebral palsy diagnosis, the more he is exposed to life, that his life will be his to conquer and a happy fulfilled one," she said. "When I found New Concepts for Living, I had that gut feeling that they, too, have the same outlook and the same goal. And they sure do."

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Here's the incredible thing: You don't readily realize the facility — on Route 17 South — previously served as a Barnes & Noble. In fact, it's so state-of-the-art and modern, most would be stunned to learn it wasn't a new build.



Melody DeJesus, New Concepts for Living direct support professional, works with a day program participant.

All of this made the opening a win-win for Paramus Mayor Chris Di Piazza.

"For starters, it's a place of purpose," he said. "To have a place as big as this, to fill a need that is bigger than most people realize, is incredible. It's what it means to be a community."

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There’s a real estate play, too.

Municipalities across the state are looking for adaptive reuse projects for retail (and especially office) buildings that no longer fit today’s needs.

Health care facilities — which need open spaces and ample parking — often are a great fit.

Di Piazza said the New Concepts for Living location will serve as a model for the community when it pitches properties to others.

“Absolutely,” he said. “It shows what you can do when you are willing to think outside of the box.”

To be clear, it’s not all roses and rainbows.

NCFL CEO Steve Setteducati said group homes can cause concern with local residents, who aren’t necessarily familiar with the concept or the daily happenings.

Those concerns, he said, do not last long.



Trish Svec, left, New Concepts for Living Day Program director, provides a tour to dignitaries before a ribbon cutting ceremony to mark the grand opening of NCFL's Paramus location.

“We’ll go see the neighbors and explain how we operate and who we serve,” he said. “Then, they understand.”

In fact, Setteducati said, they grow to appreciate the presence. The connection to the so-called outside world often tends to be as educational for the community as the group home residents, he said.

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The center will support activities and services for adults living with a variety of intellectual and developmental disabilities, including autism, cerebral palsy, Down syndrome, brain injury, fetal alcohol syndrome and rarer conditions such as Williams, Prader-Willi and Rett syndromes.

It’s all part of fulfilling the company’s motto: “Providing a Lifetime of Care for Extraordinary People.”

The state is allowing the facility to serve 120 adults the first year, approximately 200 in year two and then 300 in the year after that.

“They want us to build up to capacity,” Setteducati said. “Which is understandable.”

Reaching the number will not be a problem.

New Concepts for Living, which is renovating another facility in Rochelle Park (it will care for 80-100 adults when it opens this fall), already has a waiting list of more than 300 adults looking for a home.

The need is real, Setteducati said. And it helps provide the highest level of satisfaction.

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Setteducati speaking at the event.

“My greatest pleasure comes when the guardians realize they can let go and say, ‘I don’t have to worry; I have an agency that is really going to take care of my son or daughter,’” he said.

“I love to be able to say, ‘We’ve got it from here,’” he said.

Setteducati and New Concepts for Living certainly do.

Setteducati is quick to credit the staff.

“I can have the greatest vision, but, without them, we have nothing — they are phenomenally caring people,” he said.

His vision, however, is important.

Setteducati, who joined the board in 2015 after selling his family business, assumed the CEO role the following year.

The organization’s budget was just over \$5 million when he started. It’s now approaching \$35 million. Setteducati said he’s already planning for another facility to serve this special-needs community.

For parents such as Catalfamo, nicer words cannot be heard.

“I had been to so many facilities, searching for the right fit,” she said. “It was frustrating. I thought I would never find it. I have.”

Conversation Starter

To learn more about New Concepts for Living go to ncfl.net, <https://spaces.hightail.com/receive/1fwrvyFOIU>, or call 201-843-3427.

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