



[Community Corner](#)

'What Would Happen If We Died?' North Jersey Parents Find Home For Son With Special Needs

As Denny's parents near retirement in NJ, they worry about their disabled son, now 22. They finally found a place for him in North Jersey.



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Denny Calabrese (NCFL)



BERGEN COUNTY, NJ — Parents of kids with disabilities often wonder who will take care of them after the parents pass away — particularly since many programs stop at age 21.

Joe Calabrese and Karen Thompson were just two of many parents in New Jersey who have had that fear. And Calabrese 's job involves working with adults with special needs, so he knows the system.

Calabrese said in an interview Tuesday that he has been worrying about his adopted son, Denny, 22, as he nears retirement age. His wife, Thomson, 60, is already retired.



Nearly 20 years ago, the North Jersey couple adopted three toddlers, three years in a row. Two were brothers — Ducky and Denny — but the couple was told that Denny was severely disabled. If Calabrese and Thompson didn't take him, he would be placed into a nursing home or similar facility, Calabrese said.

Denny is blind, is in a wheelchair, suffers from seizures, and has severe developmental delays, said Calabrese. He has the mental abilities of a 6-month-old child, his dad said.

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But Denny loves music — particularly 1970s rock — and enjoys being outside in the wind. (He displays less enthusiasm about classical tunes, Thompson noted.)

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For many years, he and his wife didn't vacation together, he said, as one of them always stayed home with Denny. They gave each other breaks, traveling alone.

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They adjusted their lives in other ways. Calabrese left his marketing job to be a stay-at-home dad when Denny was a toddler, then decided to join an agency dealing with disabled people as his next career.

"My biggest fear is," he said Tuesday, "what would happen if we both died? So I'd like to take this time to be his advocate and find a really good place I'm comfortable with, rather than dying and state puts him in first place that's available, or puts him in a nursing home. That's something we wanted to avoid 20 years ago."

The pair live in Essex County, but became aware of a disability nonprofit that has been building homes in Bergen County for people with special needs. Some of the homes are helping the towns meet their state-mandated affordable housing obligations, local officials said.

New Concepts for Living, a nonprofit agency, just completed the home in Mahwah where Denny will move next month — a home for six adults with special needs.

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Calabrese became aware of the agency through his work and through private research, he said.

He had looked around for a while for a home that would let he and his wife rest easy, he said. He said that many parents struggle statewide, and that some don't even know that they can apply for special programs after their kids are 18, but before they turn 21.

Late last month, Denny's parents and local officials appeared at a ribbon cutting for the new building.

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Calabrese said he and his wife have been visiting, and expect to move Denny, now 22, in early December.

The Paramus-based nonprofit had built the 5,400-sq.ft. home in partnership with the Township of Mahwah, said Mahwah Mayor Jim Wysocki.



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Wysocki said in a statement, "This home not only helps Mahwah meet our affordable housing requirements, but it will serve a population that is too often overlooked yet equally deserving of a safe, comfortable place to call home. Providing more supportive housing for people with I/DD [intellectual and developmental delays] in the community and closer to loved ones keeps families together."

"All of our homes are designed to meet the specific needs of all residents living there while fitting seamlessly in the surrounding community," said NCFL CEO Steve Setteducati.

Two Other Children

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Calabrese said that there are at least two caregivers at all times for the six residents in the home, so that Denny and the others will get plenty of attention, while having their space.

Calabrese will soon have three kids out of the house — a daughter whom the couple adopted from Vietnam, and Denny's brother, who's Vietnamese but adopted in America. One child is finishing college and the other recently graduated.

He said once Denny is living in Mahwah, his wife and he plan to visit every Saturday or Sunday.

That is, as long as Denny isn't too busy.

"We don't want to mess up his schedule," he said.

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NCFL also recently opened two homes in River Vale. Find out more [here](#).

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