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Enquirer • Community Press & Recorder

September 16, 2009

## Group looks to offer lifelong care

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Emily Rogers, who is 29, spends much of each day in her Middletown home viewing videotapes of TV shows such as "Family Feud" and "Wheel of Fortune." She laughs at a part she likes, rewinds the tape and watches it again. Over and over.

"If you watch her, you'd say she's happy," says her father, Denny Rogers of Liberty Township. "But it's just not the quality of life we want for her."

Emily has a moderate to severe form of autism, a developmental disability that affects her ability to communicate and interact with others. Unable to make conversation, she utters only a word or two at a time. She becomes agitated by certain sounds, such as a cough or whistle. She relies on a caregiver 24/7 in the home her parents bought for her.

Suitable community programs aren't available for their daughter, so Denny and Ann Rogers banded with other parents to start the non-profit Safe Haven Farms, a \$3.2 million project where up to 24 adults with autism will live and work, aided by a specially trained staff.

The founders expect to close a deal this month on 60 rural acres in Butler County's Madison Township, about eight miles northwest of Middletown. Construction will begin soon after, and the timetable calls for the first residents to move in next spring.

It will be the first program of its kind in Greater Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky, and one of about a half dozen farm communities in the U.S. that cater to adults with autism. The closest is Bittersweet Farms near Toledo.

"We feel it's become a mission for the rest of our life - that that's why we were put here," Ann Rogers says.

When Emily was born, about three in 10,000 children were diagnosed with autism.

"I don't think I'd ever heard the word," says Denny Rogers, a former GE Aviation manager who took early retirement this year to work full time on Safe Haven Farms. He is board president.

Today, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says about 1 in 150 children have autism, a more than 20-fold increase.

Sometimes lost amid questions about what causes autism and why its prevalence has increased - neither answer is known - is this: What happens when all those children become adults?

"If I were to grade our country on adult services for individuals with autism, I'd have to give it an F," says Jeff Sell, vice president of advocacy and public policy for the Autism Society of America. "There are just very few options out there.

"It's probably the most crucial issue we face in the autism community, but it's just not something you see a lot of people talking about."

Unless it's your family that needs help

Emily, who has three typical brothers, lived with her family for the first 20 years of her life. She attended Lakota schools until age 19, and could have continued in special education classes until age 22, but refused to go.

She wasn't happy at home, either, her parents say. When stressed, she would become aggressive and sometimes attack them. The couple - particularly Ann, who stayed with her all day - rarely got a break.

"We knew she needed a more independent life from us, and we needed it for our mental health as well," Denny Rogers says.

The Butler County Board of Developmental Disabilities provided money for caregivers, and Emily's parents bought her a house. She attended a workshop with other developmentally disabled adults, but sounds in the large building stressed her out; she sometimes bit workers or fled.

She then entered a program that took her into the community for recreation and leisure activities, but that only increased her anxiety. She had a job in a grocery store for a time, but when certain sounds upset her, she'd start to remove her clothes.

Denny Rogers, who served several years on the Butler County Board of Developmental Disabilities, says the agency has done everything it can for Emily. She's now in one of its customized day programs, but only for two hours a week.

The agency's superintendent, Christina Hurr, says some adults with autism do well in existing community-based programs. But people with autism "have unique social, communication and behavioral needs. Sometimes what is available in the (developmentally disabled) world doesn't work. So sometimes people get excluded or have difficulty with the system as it is."

At an autism conference years ago, Denny and Ann Rogers listened as Ruth Sullivan, a founder of the Autism Society of America, told parents they couldn't wait for professionals to develop programs for their children. Take action yourselves, Sullivan urged.

In 2005, the couple began doing just that.

Denny Rogers has visited Bittersweet Farms about eight times and is convinced it's a good model. He also picked up ideas after visiting similar farms.

Such farms provide a calm, relaxed environment, he says. Residents, surrounded by peers and caring staff, have opportunities to work, participate in leisure and recreational activities and learn skills.

In time, more parents got involved. A group of eight families has met monthly in the Rogers' living room the past two years. Another dozen or so families have ties to the project.

Families have provided the bulk of money to date. With about \$750,000 in hand, Safe Haven has enough to make down payments on the farm property, infrastructure improvements and new housing. A capital campaign will be launched to raise \$250,000 for a down payment on a day services building.

Safe Haven will be self-sustaining, Denny Rogers says, relying on funding that adults with autism receive from Medicaid, Social Security and local sources.

But funding mechanisms are complicated and change often, says Vicki Obee-Hilt, executive director of Bittersweet Farms. It's now 26 years old and on solid footing, but the first 10 to 12 years were "touch and go," she says,

Safe Haven Farms will be built in two phases. Four homes, each serving four residents, are expected to be complete by next spring. Fourteen of the 16 available spots in those homes have been filled.

Plans call for another two homes, for eight residents, to be completed in late 2011 or early 2012. Another eight to 10 adults will participate in the farm's day programs.

Activities such as gardening, landscaping and animal care will be available both to residents and day participants. Plans call for a therapeutic horse riding program, a craft center, life skills center and recreation programs.

Safe Haven has partnered with RMS, a Worthington, Ohio-based company that helps people with disabilities, to be its service provider. A staff of 50 to 60 will be specially trained to work with adults with autism.

A farm setting, however, isn't for everyone.

"Some families won't want it just because it is so specialized and segregated," Hurr says. "But it's certainly good to have that option for people who want it."

Denny and Ann Rogers want it badly enough for their daughter and others like her that they've devoted their lives to making it happen. The farm, Denny Rogers says, is a place "she will enjoy and thrive for the rest of her life."

## Additional Facts

Fund raiser

Safe Haven Farms has a 5K run/walk fund raiser at 9 a.m. Sunday. Registration begins at 7:30 at Lakota West High School football stadium, 8940 Union Centre Blvd., West Chester Township. Cost is \$25; ages 14 and under, \$10. Information: [www.safehavenfarms.org](http://www.safehavenfarms.org).