

Rising Treetops and the COVID-19 Pandemic



RISING TREETOPS at OAKHURST'S overnight respite, after school respite and summer camp services have been significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

As of March 20th, we suspended our planned overnight respite and after school respite programs through mid-April, and have since extended the suspension of respite and summer camp services through the end of July. At this time, we cannot hold respite or camp sessions because of the current availability and reliability of testing for COVID-19, the inability to ensure safe social distancing at our camp with our camper populations, and the restrictions and availability of our counselors and support staff from overseas (where 90% of our summer staff come from). We will decide on or about July 15th on cancelling or moving forward with our August day camp and overnight summer camp sessions, including our two August Autism camp sessions and our End-of-Summer Respite session.

Please know that the safety and health of our clients, campers and staff is always the highest priority at Rising Treetops. We continue to work closely with our local public health department and our partners at New York's Office

of People with Developmental Disabilities and New Jersey's Department of Human Services to maintain safe and effective protocols for our vital services at Rising Treetops.

The one service we have continued and are committed to providing during the COVID-19 pandemic is our emergency respite service for vulnerable individuals with developmental disabilities.

Emergency Respite Services

SINCE LATE MARCH, RISING TREETOPS has had the direct care and supervisory staff to safely serve up to five emergency respite clients at a time, which in July and August is expanding up to eight clients at a time. Since March and through late June, we have served nine individuals in the program for between 30- and 45-day emergency stays.

COVID-19 has impacted our usual protocols and criteria for accepting and serving clients with developmental disabilities on an emergency basis. The safety and health of our clients and staff is always the highest priority at Rising Treetops, and as a result we are accepting referrals and requests for emergency respite services for clients with emergency placement needs of a minimum of 30 days. Other considerations include personal care needs and the overall health of the client.

New emergency respite clients are cared for by Rising Treetops' direct care staff, and are isolated from all other clients and staff for the first 14 days after arrival. All direct care staff at Rising Treetops are live-in staff and are on-site and not leaving the facility for at least 14 days prior to caring for any clients and throughout the clients' emergency respite placement at Rising Treetops.

With the need for emergency respite services even more critical this summer, Rising Treetops has hired six additional direct care workers for the three summer months to allow for 15 additional emergency clients to be served by mid-September. What follows are profiles of the nine emergency clients served through June.

Jovanty, Age 11



JOVANTY came to Rising Treetops from The Bronx in January 2020 as an emergency respite placement at the request of his care manager and other service agencies from concerns over risks of neglect. Jovanty has diagnoses of autism, ADHD, intellectual disability and seizure disorder. Since his mother is legally blind, has

struggled with other aspects of her health and was raising Jovanty’s sibling, we all agreed it was best to find Jovanty a proper long-term home elsewhere, likely at a residential school. The process of finding a permanent placement has been complicated by COVID-19, and as a result Jovanty by the end of June remains in residence at Rising Treetops. Jovanty has made significant progress since January, especially with his personal care, and is clever and smart and is practicing daily educational skills with staff. He loves to help and will clean up and throw away items without prompting while singing his “Clean Up” song. He loves dancing and is very fond of Peppa Pig.

Jovanty has been the only child at Rising Treetops and has become the “little brother” for the others who have been in residence since March. Jovanty, on his own, genuinely shows his appreciation for what the staff does for him and is kind to clients that arrive – he always invites the newest client after they are isolated for 14 days to sit down next to him at a meal, and will get them a plate, utensils and napkins. His care management agency and other agencies involved in supporting him have all thanked Rising Treetops for continuing to provide Jovanty’s care.



Keith, Age 27 and Vincent, Age 22

ARRIVING FROM BROOKLYN, brothers KEITH and VINCENT came to Rising Treetops for an emergency placement on March 30th due to their care manager’s concerns over their well-being since the COVID-19 pandemic isolated them at home with their mother. Their mother was limited

in her ability to provide the supervision and guidance needed for Keith and Vincent. Both are diagnosed with autism and intellectual disability. Keith has come to Rising Treetops for services since 2011 and Vincent since 2014.

The 14-day isolation period was difficult for Keith since he is so social, but the day he and Vincent moved out of isolation Keith was beaming. During his time at Rising Treetops, Keith showed everyone his love of singing, dancing and acting out a scene from his favorite movie. He was caring and focused on making things for others or sharing what he made with everyone. He freely expressed his love for his family and friends. Keith’s music provided motivation for everyone around him to move and to be active. Vincent was also kind with everyone and loved to help others. He enjoyed helping Jovanty with his school work and teaching him how to write letters. Their mother was thankful that we were able to have both her sons at Rising Treetops. She told us soon after they returned from their 45 days in Oakhurst they were already asking when they will be able to return.

Kysheen, Age 43 and Quincy, Age 30



FROM THE BRONX, brothers KYSHEEN and QUINCY came to Rising Treetops on April 17th for a 45-day emergency respite stay to help their aunt (who is also their guardian) be able to go to work as an essential employee of a care management agency. Both Kysheen and Quincy are diagnosed with intellectual disability and have been coming to Rising Treetops for services for six years.

Kysheen was elated to be back at Rising Treetops and was excited to start each day early. He happily sought out the daily activity schedule and enjoyed setting up and cleaning up throughout the day. He loved to greet people enthusiastically, asked lots of questions, and loved to say “you’re breaking my heart!” His brother Quincy loved being with his brother and following his lead. He and Kysheen both enjoy professional wrestling and performing various

Hulk Hogan poses. Quincy laughed a lot, had high energy, enjoyed listening to music and helping out throughout the day. Quincy was most happy when he participated in our nature/gardening program and when he was painting in an arts and crafts activity. Kysheen and Quincy's aunt was grateful for them being at Rising Treetops so she could work without concern for them with their day programs suspended during the pandemic. She also told us she was happy they could have the chance to enjoy being outside and not being cooped up in their apartment.



Andrew, Age 27

ANDREW IS FROM QUEENS, lives with his mother and began his 45-day emergency placement at Rising Treetops on May 5th at the request of his care manager and mother over concerns for Andrew's well-being during his isolation as a result of the pandemic. Andrew

has diagnoses of autism, ADHD and intellectual disability and first came to Rising Treetops in 2018 as an emergency respite placement when his mother was hospitalized and there was no appropriate alternative caregiver.

Andrew's 45 days at Rising Treetops were filled with music and soccer and basketball in the Oakhurst gym. Andrew attended several Zoom meetings with programs back home each week and was an enthusiastic learner, was very inquisitive and loved to ask questions about everything around him. Andrew had some difficulty adjusting socially after his initial 14-day isolation period, but once he left isolation and joined the rest of the "boys", he started to warm up and socialize. As an added bonus, Andrew was able to celebrate his birthday with decorations sent from his mother to help him have a more enjoyable stay. A few days after Andrew arrived, his mother called to check in and then emailed every day and told staff that she was starting to feel better, always expressing her appreciation for Rising Treetops.



Cara, Age 23

CARA IS FROM THE BRONX and began her 45-day emergency respite placement on May 25th at the request of her care manager due to her mother's complicated health issues and her inability to care for Cara during her treatment. Cara's

sister, who would normally be her next natural support, is a nurse working directly with COVID-19 patients and did not want to put Cara at risk. Cara is diagnosed with autism and cognitive delay.

Cara adjusted well at Rising Treetops and speaks to her family almost daily. Cara is sweet, friendly to everyone and loves to just chat about herself and ask people questions. Cara was the only female client during her stay, and was appropriately separated from the male clients and supervised by a female counselor in her residence. While we have had all males other than Cara in the emergency program to date, in mid-July we have three female clients scheduled to enter the program together.

Cara's mother and sister have been very grateful and comforted by Cara being at Rising Treetops so they do not have to worry about her care.

Gurleen, Age 19



GURLEEN arrived from his home in Queens on June 15th for a 30-day emergency respite placement. Gurleen lives with his mother and father and is diagnosed with autism and ADHD and first came to Rising Treetops for services in 2017. Gurleen thrives on routine and structure – the shutdown of his school and his recreational programs has greatly affected him and his family and it is made

even more difficult by his inability to fully understand the changes or handle stress well. The isolation during the pandemic has put a tremendous strain on the entire family. Gurleen's father returned to work in construction in June and his mother was no longer able to manage his behavior on her own.

During his emergency placement Gurleen has seemed happier than he has in past stays at Rising Treetops. He is often heard laughing, singing, and dancing. Gurleen has been enjoying walks around the camp and helping with small projects. Gurleen has also enjoyed teaching his counselor Punjab dancing and language. He has used his game device and ear buds far less than in prior visits to Oakhurst and has been doing very well for what is the longest he has ever been away from his family.

Please contact Charles Sutherland at 732-531-0215 or 804-467-9319, or email respite@risingtreetops.org for more information on our emergency respite service.



Jonathan, Age 30

ARRIVING FROM QUEENS, JONATHAN began his 45-day emergency placement on May 28th, as a result of his mother battling serious health issues and having difficulty providing Jonathan's personal care herself, especially since all

Jonathan's services were suspended in March due to the pandemic. Jonathan is diagnosed with cerebral palsy and has been coming to Rising Treetops for services since 2004. He was previously placed at Rising Treetops for emergency respite in 2014 as a result of his father's sudden illness and passing. Jonathan loves being at Rising Treetops, socializing with staff and being helpful whenever he can. He keeps an eye on Jovanty and reports back to staff when he is misbehaving. Jonathan is very comfortable being at Rising Treetops, and feels safe and cared for.

From the Desks of the President and Executive Director



In this historically challenging time, Rising Treetops remains committed to its mission by providing critical emergency respite services until full camp and respite services can resume safely as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Since March 20th when we suspended all but our emergency services, we have provided critical emergency care for nine clients (see their profiles above). We expect to provide this service to approximately 24 individuals by September, and if the pandemic continues to limit our regular services, we expect we will serve about 40 individuals with emergency respite services by the end of the year.

Despite an overall reduction in services, our beautiful and historic 15-acre campus has continued to need repairs and maintenance to remain in quality working condition. In January we began and completed a full renovation (floors, walls, ceilings, bathroom, roof) of our 60-year-old Marion's Cabin and by late winter completed the construction of our

new maintenance shop and a new gravel parking lot for 12 cars near our back gate. In early June, after a long permitting process, we installed a beautiful new visible sign at the main corner of our property on Monmouth Road. We have had extensive fire alarm systems replaced this spring, have done emergency repairs to our Gore staff building, and replaced our main computer network server. Even with significantly reduced services and subsequently reduced fee for service revenue, we have also had other expenses to cover, including insurance, utilities, food/cleaning supplies, New York City office rent, as well as the increased costs to keep our existing vital staff safe and protected, healthy, trained and supported.

Covering these expenses allows us to continue our emergency respite service during the pandemic, and to be ready to resume our services when it is safe to do so.

Thank you for your continued interest and support of Rising Treetops. We hope you and your loved ones are as healthy and safe as possible.

Marilyn Friedman, President
Robert Pacenza, Executive Director



Inspiring confidence and joy
in those with special needs

For more information, please contact:

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