



Rebuilding a Life

Millburn's Opportunity Project offers skills training and emotional support to hundreds of people affected by brain injury. The local business community has come forward with jobs and volunteer opportunities.

It's a winning solution for everyone.

WRITTEN BY TARA GEORGE

There's a shiny red scar the size of a nickel nestled at the base of Alex LaSala's neck. It's clearly visible and she makes no attempt to hide it with jewelry or clothing, the way another 28-year-old young woman might. But given what she's lived through and survived, a blemish at the base of her neck seems inconsequential compared to the invisible scars she bears from a brain injury that dramatically altered her life.

LaSala collided with another driver in 2013 when she was driving to a job interview on her brand-new moped. Doctors put her in a medically induced coma for three months to manage the swelling in her brain and when she came to, she had to relearn the basics: walking, eating and caring for herself.

The scar on her neck is from the breathing tube that sustained her while she was out. She doesn't remember much of the hospital experience, nor the accident, although she knows she was wearing a white helmet at the time. When she talks she is calm and speaks deliberately. You wouldn't guess she had a brain injury. But the trouble lies with her short-term memory.

LaSala sometimes cannot remember things moments after they were told to her. To adapt she takes notes, even for simple things like when her mom tells her to go into the basement to do the laundry. By the time she gets down there she's forgotten why she's there and what she's to do. She uses the alarm on her smartphone to remind her to check her Notes app where she's written the instructions to herself just seconds earlier.

It's a memory-jogging technique she's been working on with a not-for-profit organization based in Millburn called Opportunity Project. Five times a week, LaSala comes in to the airy, bright "Clubhouse" located in a modern office building on East Willoughby Street to brush shoulders with other folks also suffering from brain trauma who are also trying to work on regaining an independent life.



A WORK CENTERED DAY Mike Nimeroff spends one day a week at the Millburn Library as part of a partnership with Opportunity Project.



RESUME BUILDING Opportunity Project member Alex LaSala hopes her work at the Millburn Library will convince future employers that she's career-ready.

At any one time about two dozen members attend the Clubhouse, making meals in the kitchen, logging on to the desktop computers to chase down job leads or to get counseling and help. Their injuries are from car accidents, aneurisms, strokes or brain trauma from war. The degree and nature of their disabilities differ greatly. Some, like LaSala, seem articulate and intact. Others are noticeably more impaired.

One of the central missions of the

Clubhouse, besides offering support and life skills training, is employment. It is the only institution in New Jersey to provide work-training and support to adults with traumatic brain injury. Based on a philosophy that values a "work-ordered day," the Clubhouse helps its members develop a "work personality," to learn the appropriate social behavior in an office environment or more run-of-the-mill job-hunting techniques like resume writing. ➤

OPPORTUNITY



A PLACE FOR HELP The Clubhouse, located on East Willoughby Street in Millburn.

The Millburn-Short Hills community has been a good neighbor to the organization's back-to-work mission. Splurge Bakery, La Strada pizzeria, Whole Foods Market, the American Red Cross, New Eyes for the Needy and United Way have all employed Clubhouse members, many on a part-time basis.

LaSala, for example, goes a few times a week to work at the Millburn Free Public Library. The work she does re-shelving books doesn't require short-term memory. All she really needs to know is the alphabet, which she remembers well. She likes being in the work environment, too. It's nice, she says, to have colleagues and to be productive. She's hoping to go to school to get qualified as an art teacher. Having the library experience on her resume will no doubt help to reassure any prospective employers that she is, as she says, "a normal person."

Michael Banick, the library's director, says the work of the Clubhouse members is by no means busy work. Stacking the CDs and re-shelving books helps maintain the necessary order of the library and frees the librarians up to do other tasks. He feels the library benefits as much as the Clubhouse members do.

Carol Albanese, the executive director of Opportunity Project, says the surrounding businesses, institutions and residents have been generous. She fondly recalls the firefighters who hosted a fundraiser. Local businesses and organizations have taken up the Clubhouse as their



COMMUNITY MINDED Members of Opportunity Project pose in front of the Millburn Clubhouse

charitable cause. And places like ShopRite and the farmers' market occasionally serve as sites for outings for Clubhouse members.

"They are always well-received," says Albanese. "This town has really given us so much to work with."

Another Clubhouse member, Mike Nimeroff, has also been working at the library about once a week. In January 2002 while hospitalized for Guillian Barre Syndrome, an immune disorder, Nimeroff had respiratory failure and went into cardiac arrest. He was in a coma for several days and as a result, his brain was damaged.

Like many of the Clubhouse members, Nimeroff can remember life

before his injury, a fact he and others often struggle to come to grips with. Despite that, he's cheerful, a real wisecracker, and has an ease with people that hints at the insurance salesman he used to be before the injury.

Nimeroff lives with his 85-year-old mother and relies on a driver to get around. He's working toward getting his driving license. He says working at the library job helps him feel productive and he has come to get to know and like the other members at the Clubhouse he's met over the years.

"I play games and I socialize with people," he says. "I know lots of people here now. Coming here gives me somewhere to go and something to do." ■