

Home

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members can be contentious. But many of the women who choose to live here have no children, she said, and those who do typically work things out with them over time. It's rare, she said, for there to be ongoing ill will over the disposition of the estate.

"I can tell you that for every woman who has lived here, we have paid out way, way more [in care] than they have brought in," Martin said.

Is it sustainable?

According to Richard Erb of the Maine Health Care Association, which represents Maine's long-term care and assisted living facilities, there are just a handful of homes for seniors as small as the Deborah Lincoln House.

"There is a lot to be said for these small facilities," he said. "They are generally more comfortable, more homelike."

Almost all accept a combination of private-pay and Medicaid residents, he said. In fact, the Deborah Lincoln House may be the only one that eschews public funding altogether and requires residents to pay in advance with their estates.

"It does seem like a vestige of an earlier time," he said.

The Deborah Lincoln House is not a nursing home. The building is not fully handicapped accessible. Staff members — which include nurses, aides, a cook and a 24-hour on-site "matron" — are trained and allowed to provide only a low level of personal support.

"The ladies really take care of themselves," Diane Martin said, with assistance and supervision available for bathing and dressing if it's needed. "We keep them here as long as we can," she said, adding, "Most residents are able to die right here."

But if loss of mobility and cognition become a matter of personal safety, bylaws require the organization to transfer a resident to a nursing home for more comprehensive care.

Right now, two former residents are living at a nearby nursing home. The Deborah Lincoln House pays for their care.

Although the private-pay-only system has worked well for over a century, board president Ed Varney said, trends toward longer life expectancy make it likely that more Deborah Lincoln House residents will eventually need nursing home care. With an average annual price tag of about \$100,000 and rising every year, Varney said paying for nursing home care has the potential to destabilize the finances of the Deborah Lincoln House.

Generally, the Medicaid program picks up the nursing home tab for low-income individuals, but most Deborah Lincoln House residents do not qualify for Medicaid due to the value of their pre-admission assets. The board is in early discussions now with state Medicaid officials, Varney said, to see if a compromise can be reached, perhaps by sharing the cost of residents' nursing home care.

"As things are now, we're fine," he said. "But you never know what the future will hold. The Deborah Lincoln House has been around for more than 100 years and we want it to last for another hundred."

Curves

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shelter for at-risk youth.

Outside of school, she's lobbied and testified on behalf of legislation at the state and federal levels that would improve services, change laws, and make things better and more logical for youths in foster care — especially those in transition to adulthood.

She and I told our story in a special project in February 2013 called Maine Youth Transition Collaborative, which, with support and guidance from the National Resource Center for Permanency and Family Connection and Youth Leadership Advisory Team — a joint project of Maine's Youth in Foster Care, Maine DHHS and Muskie School at University of Southern Maine — produced our digital story as one of four still being used to educate people about the experiences of foster youth and families as the youth transition into adulthood.

Our story, called "Journey of Life," can be found online at www.maine-yc.org/maine-youth-stories.

We also have participated in training panels for foster parents and foster care workers around the state. She has told her story over

and over, highlighting what worked and what didn't, and when I've participated, I have added the perspective of a family of record, which has no actual legal rights, trying to work within the foster care system.

Her dream is to someday establish a home where foster youth in transition can live while earning a college degree. Homelessness is one of the biggest issues foster youth who have aged out of the system face.

That may be far in her future. In her more immediate future, she has a great fiancé and will be married this year. With her college degree, a full-time job, a place to live and a stable relationship, there was still something missing.

The one thing she's always wanted is a permanent, legal place in the family — and someone to call "Mom" forever.

Recently, we did that together. On a beautiful day in May, we walked into Maine Probate Court and held our collective breath as the judge looked over our petition for adult adoption. He asked us the obligatory questions,

ruled on a couple of special requests, and then there we were — mother and daughter at last. Legally.

Although I couldn't do that for her before Jim died, nor immediately afterward because I couldn't deal with my own life, I could do it now — finally.

The Maine Probate Court decree with its gold seal and her birth certificate arrived in the mail recently. We celebrated with a dinner as a family — my parents, stepdaughter, daughter and two "sons" — my daughters' other halves.

You see, family isn't about blood. It's about a shared bond of love and respect.

In my heart, her status in my life has been official for a long time. Although I tried to show her my love and pride through my actions, the ultimate proof to her — who has been tossed around in a jumbled system full of distrust and inconsistencies — was my willingness to go to court and make it legal.

I finally am in a place in my own life where I can give that kind of commitment to another human being again and mean it. In my heart, I

have two daughters, who are as real to me as if I had given birth to them myself and held them in my arms as infants.

I think that's a special kind of love story, and one I still share with Jim.

As a longtime employee of the Bangor Daily News, Julie Harris has served many roles over the years, but she now has her dream job as community editor. She lives in Hermon with her four Brittany dogs: Sassy, Bullet, Thistle and Quincy, who keep her busy in various dog sports. She was widowed at age 51 when her husband, Jim, died of pancreatic cancer. Follow her blog at curves.bangordailynews.com.

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