

VINE VILLAGE

It takes a village — and a family

Vine Village celebrates its 40th anniversary Sunday

19 HOURS AGO • [HOWARD YUNE](#)

More than 100 people have created artworks, tended gardens and animals, and found jobs through Vine Village since it opened four decades ago. But in the beginning, the Carneros center's founders sought only one thing — a place to nurture their children through their adult lives.

"This is my sister Debbie, and she's the reason for this place," Mike Kerson said Thursday afternoon, pointing to a small, stout woman among a dozen

people inside Vine Village's art studio. Born in 1955 with Down syndrome, Debbie Kerson, as she approached adulthood, left her parents, George and Grace, facing the two grim choices most doctors gave parents of the developmentally disabled: Prepare to care for her at home even into their old age, or put her away.

"The doctors told my parents, 'Put her in an institution; put your energy into your other kids,'" recalled Mike Kerson, now 69 and executive director of the nonprofit Vine Village. "And my parents said 'No way' — that's why there is a Vine Village. They made us real aware that our sister was not a second-class citizen."

Now 58, Debbie Kerson continues to live at the center her family created as a third way: Vine Village Inc., a residential, training and therapy center for special-needs adults. The facility celebrates its 40th anniversary at 4 p.m. Sunday with a fundraising festival, dinner and auction at its 25-acre grounds amid the vineyards of the Carneros district, west of Napa.

The Kersons partnered in 1973 with Dante Bagnani, who also had a developmentally disabled son, to turn a former ranch into a center designed to give its residents and visitors the most independence they could develop.

Old outbuildings have become an art center where instructors guide some 25 day clients in drawing, painting, weaving and other creative media, along with a pottery and wood shop where birdhouses and crafts are made inside a onetime prune-drying house. On the ranch grounds are goats, chickens and other farm animals as well as fields of organic fruits and produce, also tended by Vine Village clients.

On Thursday, creative works in different media took shape under the fingers of Vine Village clients in a space more like a family room than a classroom, with men and women working at their own pace under the light touch of Catalina Arabia, art program director.

On a computer in the back corner, Shawn McKetchnie busily worked the keyboard, adding to an

informal memoir that already had reached 166 printed pages. At the opposite end of the studio, Diane Pidgeon, 33, put final touches on a painting of tightly composed geometric spaces and pointed onion domes — carefully checking her colors against a seven-page palette she had created with more than 200 different hues.

The center's mission also extends to its clients who are not in the studios or gardens — because of the food-service or retail jobs they hold in Napa, often arranged by Vine Village staff. About 18 clients make their home in three bungalowlike buildings on the premises, with communal kitchens, game and TV dens, and single rooms for most residents.

After 40 years, the extent of Vine Village still seems like a minor miracle to Mike Kerson, who was in his late 20s at the time of the center's founding and remembers years of struggle to raise funds and overhaul worn-down ranch buildings.

"Nancy and I got \$200 a month, plus room and board — for years," recalled the director. "That was for running the tractor, putting in sewer lines, administrative work. ... It was scary! There was no money. And we were raising her" — their daughter Saanen, now 39.

Vine Village operates on an estimated \$1 million annual budget, which the Kerson family said includes donations from the Napa Valley Community Foundation and contributions from local wineries — not only money but sometimes also labor for new fencing and other tasks.

Still, with memories of the unrelenting work to keep Vine Village running, Mike Kerson was reluctant to push his daughter too hard to join the family enterprise. But after stints in real estate, schoolteaching and volleyball coaching, Saanen Kerson felt the pull of the family mission and joined her parents at Vine Village in 2007, eventually becoming its associate director.

"I see it as such an honor to be here and continue their work," she said. "I grew up here. When I was small, my parents did everything here, including caring for residents. I love the place and the people here, and thinking about how I wanted to live, I always wanted this place to continue, to be connected to the family."

Although her aunt was the original impetus for creating the home, Saanen Kerson pointed to the sheer numbers of special-needs Americans needing a place for their adult years — more than 852,000 developmentally disabled people, nearly a quarter of the nation's total, are cared for by relatives older than 60, according to a report published this year by the University of Colorado's psychiatry department — as an even more pressing reason to continue her work.

On the cusp of a fifth decade working with special-needs Napers, Mike Kerson's enthusiasm appeared little dimmed.

"I love this; this is the ultimate challenge and I love it," he said. "Every day you tell yourself, 'Look at the opportunities.' This is all about doing the right stuff.

"People walk in and say 'Wow, where are we? This is really cool!' It's so amazing to be here, and this is totally worth it."