

## Neighbor2Neighbor: Vine Village supports Napa's developmentally disabled

JULY 08, 2012 8:54 PM • [CAROL DICK](#)

“Warehousing” is an ugly term when applied to people, but if you are my age, you remember some dark corner of town (and your public school) that provided little more than this for folks with developmental disabilities.

At my elementary school, the only time I saw special-needs kids was when they temporarily shared their poorly lit basement classroom with us during air raid drills. We exchanged confused glances, I'm sure.

When George and Grace Kerson's daughter, Debbie, was ready to graduate from a special Santa Barbara school back in the early 1970s, they wanted her development to continue toward independence and purposefulness. The Kersons and their friends, the Bagnanis, expected their developmentally disabled children to feel valued and useful, respected and dignified — a clear contrast to the state hospital commitment that awaited most similar children who no longer lived at home.

So they bought a 25-acre working farm. To see what a wonder it has become over the past several decades, visit Vine Village on Old Sonoma Road. It is a happy, lively place.

### **What is your purpose or mission?**

Nancy Kerson, assistant director: “Vine Village, Inc., is a nonprofit organization serving the special needs of people with developmental disabilities. Vine Village provides both residential and day activity programs on a beautiful 25-acre ranch, located just outside the city limits of Napa.

“Vine Village offers a positive lifestyle alternative to both the restrictions of life in large institutions and to the isolation of independent living or living with relatives. The founders wanted their children and others like them to have the same quality of life, sense of belonging and interdependence that their non-handicapped adult children enjoyed through their own work, families and community involvement.”

### **In brief, what's the history of your organization?**

“Vine Village was created by three parents of people with developmental disabilities: George and Grace Kerson, and Dante Bagnani.

“It opened in May of 1973, under the direction of the Kersons' son, Michael” and his wife, Nancy, who have “served as executive and assistant directors ever since. Their daughter, Saanen, was born during Vine Village's early years, grew up there, and is now the associate director and certified administrator.”

## **Who are the people you serve?**

“Currently there are 16 residents, sharing three homes. Most of these people hold jobs or attend day programs in town. The Vine Village Country Day Program is an arts-centered day activities program that offers a wide range of creative venues, including drawing and painting, textiles, woodworking, gardening, nature walks, visiting the livestock, dog-walking, music, occasional dances, games and socializing.

“The program serves 20 clients per day, Monday through Friday, although it is not necessarily the same 20. Many clients combine part-time attendance at the Vine Village program with a part-time job. Vine Village clients also create and sell products at the Napa Farmers Market, hold Christmas craft sales of their artwork, and work in various local industries, among other activities.”

## **Is there an anecdote that illustrates the work you do?**

“One of our part-time day clients recently said that her experiences in our day program allowed her to build the skills and self-confidence to realize her dream of helping children in a preschool program. She now works with special-needs children four days a week and returns to the Vine Village program for Fridays.

“And here’s another wonderful story: Arthur and Twila Van Damme met at Vine Village in 1975, when they were in their late teens and new residents. They fell in love, and married in 1976. Still happily married, Twila is a prolific artist in the Vine Village Day Program, and Arthur works at Vine Village as a groundskeeper and assistant with resident activities.”

## **What’s a current need or upcoming project?**

“Our annual fundraiser, ‘The Vine Village Celebration: A Day in the Country,’ is Sunday, July 22, from 2 to 6 p.m. We definitely can use help cleaning and setting up for this event, serving and bussing tables, directing parking, etc.

“A longer-term project that would benefit from volunteer service is the planting of a new fruit orchard to expand our gardening and small farming program for day clients, as well as to produce healthy food for our residents. We also need to re-fence several acres for livestock grazing and fire prevention. Other needs include replacing our aging minivan. Contact our office at 255-4006 if interested in getting involved with any of these projects.”

Each week, Napa Valley CanDo provides a profile of a Napa Valley nonprofit or service club — what the organization does, what it needs and how an interested person can get involved. For more information on the column, contact Hilary Zunin at [CanDoN2N@gmail.com](mailto:CanDoN2N@gmail.com). To learn more about opportunities for community service, visit [NVCaDo.org](http://NVCaDo.org).

## **Vine Village, Inc.**

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