



Storytellers @RPL
Interviewee: Gail Tamirian-Mandeli
Interviewer: Sarah Kiefer
Recorded on March 3, 2017

SARAH: My name is Sarah Kiefer today is March 3, 2017 and I'm speaking with Gail Tamirian-Mandeli, who is the executive director of Life Opportunities in Ridgewood New Jersey. We are recording this interview in the Bolger Heritage Center of the Ridgewood Public Library. Thank you Gail so much for coming today, appreciate you agreeing to have your story recorded or actually Life Opportunities stories recorded. So I guess to get started, could you explain a little bit about what Life Opportunities, what type of services it provides to the community?

GAIL: Yes, Life Opportunities Unlimited is a human service agency for folks with developmental disabilities. So we provide residential services and a program services to individuals who in the past you would've noted that they were mentally retarded or had another disability. Actually the definition of a developmental disability is that it is the early onset prior to the age of 21. So the folks we serve have been disabled all of their lives, for the most part.

SARAH: Okay, and how did the, this nonprofit start in Ridgewood and when?

GAIL: It started, we became operational in that we rented office space in 1997 in, at 61 North Maple actually, if you if you like to know. We were responding to a need that the County and the State had identified. The Developmental Center in Princeton, the North Princeton Developmental Center, had been scheduled to close, and they were in desperate need for group homes for the individuals who were living in that Developmental Center. So we began by opening our Glen Rock group home in response to that need which is a total care facility. So we brought five folks from the Developmental Center out, all senior citizens, all medically involved as well as having their developmental disability, and all individuals who had lived more than 20 years in the institution. We actually had one woman who came to us after having lived in this institution for 64 years. So some of what we did in that house was just get people used to being in a community again.

SARAH: Okay, and along those lines, can you describe those programs that you provide so that they are getting more involved in the community?

GAIL: Okay, what we try to do, and in Glen Rock specifically, that's a total care facility so in that home everyone who's there is literally taken care of. And that would mean they are helped to dress, their help to their food is prepared for them, there, all of their needs are being met. In the other group homes it is less so, the other folks are more ambulatory and able and those folks may be also functioning on a higher level, so they are out in the community and in the group home helping to do things that need to be done. So they make their beds and they may help in preparing their meals and helping with their laundry and shopping and things like that. So other than the Glen Rock group home, all of the folks in our Midland Park group home, Washington Township group home, in Fair Lawn group homes, are out and about in the community living like you and I live. So you'll see them in the supermarket, you'll see some of our, one of our fellows actually worked in Stop & Shop and retired from there a few years ago. So they are out doing what everybody else does. They're visiting museums, they are going to concerts, they are here in town, they participate in all of the activities we have to offer. And Ridgewood has a lot of things to offer, so you'll see them going to the art in the park in the summers, and watching the film movie you know the movie night, and going to the Kasschau for the concerts. So they're around. They use the libraries, they use the libraries in their own towns though.

SARAH: And I had read an article that you had hosted a dance can you talk a little bit about that event and what it meant to your, to the company?

GAIL: The dance was an interesting concept. The whole, the whole story of Life Opportunities is kind of an interesting concept. I had worked for another agency for 10 years and left that agency to open this one. So while I'm the Executive Director here, I'm also the Founder. At the time that I decided I would be opening this agency I realized, or found out that I was expecting. So we had, my husband had said to me, "oh tell them you're not gonna do it you're not gonna do it". And I said no no, both things are a blessing. We live in Ridgewood, and have been living in Ridgewood now for 25 years. I said, this baby will come to work with me. Which if someone told me this I'd say this woman is out of her mind because you're going to open up a business, you're going to take your infant to work with you, and you're going to be dealing, that business is dealing with the needs of people who are very needy. But nonetheless I, I am a firm believer that God put you where you're supposed to be, and you do what you're supposed to be doing, and it worked out. So with Matthew in tow, we went to work every day to the office at 61 North Maple, which then became sort of an annex to our home. And he had a very interesting upbringing. He had exposure to people that most people don't have exposure to. So he got to know our clients and love our clients. They're like uncles and aunts to him. So he was 15 years old and came home one day after walking around town with his friends and said you know that club Blend? And I said yes it's closed isn't it? And he said yeah it is closed. I think we should have a nightclub experience for the clients. And I said what are you talking? He said, I think they should have a real club experience. And I said, Matthew, first of all, you never, what do you know a club experience? But they go to dances every week and that was just his point they do go every week. They go to churches, they go to schools,

and these things go on, but they're like a school dance in a gymnasium. He wanted to step it up, and God bless him he did. He kept hounding me to find out who owned Blend, which was now closed. And we called Joan Groome at the Chamber, and she said well it's Ed Sullivan. I mean, could you have a better name than that? So we were saying okay do you think he'd give us Blend? He said absolutely, you can have it for the night. It'll be its last hoorah, it's going to be a steakhouse soon. And sure enough it was its last hoorah. We went in there, we organized, we cleaned, we got it going. One of the fellas that works with us at Life Opportunities in the day program, he's a DJ, he donated his music and his time. Other people, Matthew then went with Ed knocking on peoples' doors and introducing himself, telling their, them, telling him, what, them, what they wanted to do. And the first people who supported us was Paul Vagianos at "It's Greek to Me", and the Matt Houghey-Cohen from "The Office". They catered the entire event. So it was an incredible night. Tim, Tim Hillman who is a videographer in town, he did a video of it. There's a whole film of it. Clients came from various agencies, it was the night after Valentine's Day, there was a red carpet. Matthew had not only done this part but he gave it a logo it's called Club Blue Tonight. There were T-shirts made, there was black T-shirts for security guards. The staff came and acted in that capacity, as well as other you know, in other roles that you would have in a club. And it was an incredible night. And, to his credit he said, well we have to do it again. So the following year he's saying where can we do it, where can we do it? Well the old Bank of America building was empty on East Ridgewood Avenue. Again he calls his now best friend Ed Sullivan and said Ed where can we, who owns the building? Ed introduced him to the owner of the building and the man said go ahead take it. Again we did the whole shebang, and found out, this was, you know sometimes things are really meant to be. And this one afternoon we had to go to rent the tables and it was different there were no tables, there were no chairs, there were no tablecloth. So we went to rent all this equipment and we thought, well you know this is a bank, it probably needs lighting too. So they said okay they'd get back to us with the cost of the lighting. Well the cost of the lighting was just so out of sight I, I had, I was picking him up from school and the, I had just got an email telling me what it would cost and I said him, Matthew we can't, we can't swing this. All of a sudden he said I forgot my computer, can we go home? And that's always an advantage to have your office and your home in the same town. I have the world's best commute, four minutes with lights. So he goes in the house to get the computer, as he closes the car door the cell phone rings. It's the secretary in the office, saying some man saw the article in the Bergen Record and he's a lighting designer, he wants to design the lighting. We were so taken back, of course we welcomed him, he's stuck with us because now that Club Blue has not just been, that those two years, it's gone on two years at Park West Loft because we've run out of empty buildings in Ridgewood that could handle this. And it's gone from the clients who came from the various group homes in the county, to people all over the county who know about it, wait for it, can't wait for the event. And you know you don't think that one night a year could be so meaningful, but it's a classy, it's a classy night. I mean last year there, oh the Project Interact Kids come and dance and they've got their colored T-shirts on that say Club Blue. But last year we even had sunglasses that had the Club Blue insignia on the sides. And people, they really are so taken with this because it's something that's real and it's grown up, and it's clearly for

adults, it's clearly what adults do because you know you walk that red carpet, everybody knows that red carpet. No matter what level of functioning you're on and all I have to tell you is to watch those videos and see the expressions on their faces when they see that red carpet. They know this is unlike anything else they've ever done. And, and it always is [crosstalk]. So yeah to now, this year he's he's probably gonna do the Loft again because we still don't have a big space in town, which is a good thing [laughter].

SARAH: Yeah, about how many people would you say attend it then?

GAIL: Oh there's so much, there's, it's usually over a 100, it's usually like 100, 125. Last year actually, believe it or not, People Magazine saw the article in the Record and had a reporter call and do an interview. So it was on People, it was in People.com. So it's really made it, gotten to be quite an event. So Matthew claims and I, and I tend to believe him, that he's going to keep this going, you know forever [laughter].

SARAH: Forever is a long time but you know, keeping it going is good. How could you describe how your business has been, or the agency has changed over the last 5, 10, 20 years I guess?

GAIL: Well the major changes that are happening right now, is that we contract with the state of New Jersey in order to provide the services that we provide. And at this point we are on the threshold of becoming a fee-for-service agency which means we will now be charging Medicaid. So it'll be functioning administratively at least in the same way that a nursing home does. It won't be a contract any longer, it'll be hard and you'll get paid for the services that you're providing. And so there's a whole billing component, which is kind of unfair and and disheartening because it takes you away from the other parts of what you do. But I think in the end it will all work out, as long as the clients are happy and able to do the things that they enjoy doing.

SARAH: Okay, and what inspired you to get involved in the public service like this?

GAIL: I have an undergraduate degree in speech pathology and after many, many, many, many, years of doing practicums in, in speech and whatnot, as I was studying, many hours not years I should say. I realized when I was young, I wanted to touch more people faster. That, that was what was important to me. So I was very fortunate in that I have a job as a speech therapist for a while, and from there I went to Bergen Community College and became their Director of Programs for the Disabled. Now we're going back a long time, we're going back to the 70s when the disabled movement was just getting started. So at that point I left after 4 1/2 years and I had instituted programs there for people with disabilities. And then I went on to do a Masters degree in the UK on a fellowship, which was lovely and came back and said, you know what I really want to open up an agency. I want to work for a not-for-profit that is providing services to the disabled. And that's what, what ultimately I did. I worked for another agency, left there to come and, and open this one and it's been a very it's been very exciting. And it's been a blessing to know that you are where you're supposed to be, and that you're doing what you're supposed to be doing. And our client's lives are so

rich because of what we do. I mean they're doing things that you can only hope members of the general population take advantage of. For example, there is an art show that the county sponsors every, every fall, Events on Park. And my guys take photography classes through the day program. So we asked if we could participate, in their own, and the county is only too happy and only too welcoming to have us there. We, we have them have an exhibit every year, they put their work on exhibit as well. It's, it's a validation of who they are and what they can do rather than focusing on what they can't do. And that you sometimes, people say to me what do you think that the magic is of this agency or the way your programs operate because we've had folks that have had real behavior issues that don't anymore. And the answer is when you treat a person respectfully, and you understand what their needs are and they understand what your expectations are, and they trust you and you trust them, they rise to the occasion. And we've seen that time and time again. I mean we've had people who had terrible behaviors who don't anymore and it's because they're treated like adults number one, and number two we don't focus on what they can't do, we focus on what they can do and we build on that.

SARAH: Well that makes sense, and along those lines, like what you can and can't do, is there a particular client that maybe influenced how you thought about running the agency or just maybe even a story of client that impacted your life?

GAIL: Well I think if I, if I were to say to you there's no one client that I can point to. But what I can tell you is a story that someone shared with me about a client that used to, he's passed away since, he used to live in our Midland Park group home and he was very low functioning. I remember when he came, and he was again from the North Princeton Developmental Center closing, and he really was very low functioning. They said he's functioning like a two-year-old, and I remember when I met him saying, oh no Matthew is two years old, he's functioning like he's 16 months. He came anyway and we gave him I think a very special life. He started calling the group home manager Mama, he never had words, he didn't speak before, he was in his 50s. The other clients looked at him as though he were a younger sibling, and they would make sure that in the mornings, when they left for the day program, they, one of them would make sure that Larry had his, his lunchbox. And somebody else would say, Larry come here let me zip your coat if the staff hadn't zipped it for him. And then they would make sure he got on the van and he was seated and strapped in. They, they saw a need to take care of him and protect him. And he had, sadly, he had aspiration pneumonia more than once. And we were in the hospital, and the guardian who was his cousin, who God bless her, she came down from Vermont said, they're telling me he needs a tracheotomy. Now we're not a medical facility, we're based on a social systems approach, so she said, so we don't have nurses, we don't have doctors, we use the nurses and doctors in the community just like you would. And they wanted to do the trach and there's always a danger with a tracheotomy that it can't be reversed. But he was gonna die if they didn't do it. So she looked at me and I said, what do you, you have no choice, so do it. So they did the trach and of course it couldn't be reversed. And by not being reversed, we could bring him back to the group home. However, we stayed faithful to him. And this to me was so significant because the clients in the

Midland Park group home, that's where he lived, would go every week or two to the hospital to see him. And one week one of the clients said, came back and said to the manager, we can bring him home Maureen. We can bring him home. Larry can come home. You and I, we can take care of him. A few weeks went by, they went back to visit him, and they realize, he, he came out, when they left, he's, they said to him, they said to her, he said to her, I think he could go live in Glen Rock because remember Glen Rock's total care. I think he could go live in Glen Rock. And I, and when the story came back to me I was really touched. Because they still cared for him, and they saw, sorry, that this was one family. And as long as he was with us he was still okay. Didn't matter which group home, just mattered he was with us. Sadly it didn't work out. We still advocated for him, I did, and all of the rest, but as luck would have it he passed away. And he, you know, but he's finally at peace. But they cared about him. Sorry about that.

SARAH: It was a very nice story. And it's things like that, that you know, looks like it's such a great accomplishment in your work and volunteer career with Life Opportunities.

GAIL: Well I'm not a volunteer I'm their Executive Director [crosstalk] and I am paid so that should, you know that.

SARAH: But still, I mean the accomplishments that the agency has made an impact on Ridgewood and Glen Rock, the surrounding communities as well. And looking ahead do you have any other goals that you're working towards with the agency?

GAIL: Yeah we would like very much to start, we have a couple of ideas for day programs. And they would be very exciting. The program we have right now is one that was originally established for the needs of a very needy population which were the folks we had brought out of the institution. While we still have that contingent to to to serve, we also realize that we'd like to do some other kinds of things as well. And, we have right now on the, on the aflame boiling a pot, so that we can start possibly another new program. And its it's an exciting time because it would be for more able people. So it would be more purposeful and not you what our guys do in their day program now is recreational. There's a horticultural therapist who comes in, there's a music therapist, there's a [unintelligible], the women have what we call woman's club, and it's a it's a, a social worker who comes in and does a group session with them on women's issues that pertain to them. And they have their issues you know, they really, really do have their issues. So you know that's what we're doing now. But this other program would be more work based. So as soon as we hear about it, I'll come back and tell you.

SARAH: Ok yes we'll do a part two [crosstalk]. And is there anything else you wanted to share about your stories with Life Opportunities?

GAIL: I think, I think the most important thing about Life Opportunities Unlimited is that it is providing a service, it is providing a life for folks who otherwise might not have a life.

I mean their families are long gone for the most part. They may have siblings, but the siblings are not able or equipped to support them on a daily basis. You know I always say to people, we contract with the state to provide residences. But we don't give residences, we give lives. Because our guys have full lives and they're a part of the community. They are as much a part of the community as you or I. And I guess that's pretty much what it's all about. Everybody having an opportunity to make their mark. And our guys do.

SARAH: That's really great. Well thank you so much for taking the time to come over here and talk. And I hope that we do get a part two when the new program gets started. And yeah that's it, thank you so much Gail I appreciate it.

GAIL: Thank you for having me Sarah.