

EXC 621 Field Experience

Shire House Program Observation

Ivy May Lazaro

National University

Introduction

One Friday afternoon on February 9th, I called Shire House of San Jose, CA to introduce myself as a teacher working towards an Autism Certification under the tutelage of national University. To be honest, I wasn't feeling as positive having been cut short by another private organization and curtly denied a request for observation earlier in the day. I stated my purpose which was to discover what programs Shire House has in place for young adults on the autism spectrum disorder. To my relief, I was able to connect with a very warm and accommodating person who turned out to be Elizabeth Kane, Founder and Executive Director of Shire House. She was driving when I called but she extended an invitation and recommended that I come by, observe and participate in their Socials hosted every Friday night from 6-9 pm. I double-checked with her to be sure that I could actually drop by & observe less than 4-hours from when I called and she gave me confirmation. I was thrilled and expressed my appreciation.

With the little time I have before my observation, I tried to learn as much as I can about Shire House so that I am prepared if/when given the opportunity to sit down and talk to her. Some of the things I discovered through internet research include Liz being inspired by her son after he graduated from high school with a diploma (An Overview of Shire House's Services, 2017; Shire House, 2018). All the special education supports and services he used to receive in school has come to a stop and as a high-functioning individual with Autism, he needed continuous assistance in the areas of life, social and job skills training. Another thing that I learned about Shire House is that their current Vine Street location in San Jose, CA is being leased to them since December 2015 by a couple who bought it during the time when Shire House needed to move from their former location at Georgetta Drive. Kate & Fred Weber

wanted to help because they saw their son benefit greatly from attending programs at Shire House (Baum, 2015).

Description of Place and Activities

When I arrived at Shire House that Friday Night, I was greeted by a friendly little Post-it sign on the front door that says, “Come-in =)”. Walking into the hallway, I saw 6-8 individuals sitting on the sofa and around a small dining room table watching the opening ceremony for the 2018 Winter Olympics. Some of them looked up and offered greetings.

In the kitchen, trail mix, peanuts, boxes of pizza, bottles of soda, and water were laid out on the island counter. Clients were walking in and out of the kitchen to get their meal and go back to their choice of activity. About 4 or 5 individuals stayed to talk about their day at work or school. A male staff member washing dishes in the kitchen, paused to introduce himself as Nick and another one offered a hand to welcome me. Her name was Meg and she'll be available to answer questions on behalf of Shire House's Program Director, Frances. Liz informed them about my visit and I was given a tour around the house.

There were three floors of the Shire House including the basement. On the first-floor were the living room, dining room, and kitchen. The clients' bedrooms and shared bathroom are arranged dorm style by the main hallway. The laundry area is in the back adjacent to the stairwell. The basement has a den with a comfy sofa and assorted chairs for anybody to sit on along with a 52" or so TV monitor for gaming. Clients are free to bring and set-up their personal game-consoles and controllers. Beside the TV is a turned-on desktop computer.

That evening, four male individuals were playing “Full Metal Furies”. The object of the game, they explained, was to take down snipers, survive bomb attacks and get through different

levels. At one point, one of the players asked their social mentor if he wanted to play with the team and handed him his game controller. At another time, the TV went blank during the height of the battle. All the individuals with ASD remained calm and brainstormed reasons why it could have happened while they tried to figure out how to get the TV working again. Not one client lost their temper.

Across from the den is another kitchen complete with a refrigerator and pantry. An individual stayed there watching YouTube and using the internet for the duration of the social. When I said engaged him in conversation, he told me that no one was interested in what he was working on on the computer.

There is also another bedroom and bathroom in the hallway which leads out to the backyard. Shire House's backyard boasts of a mini-plot that thrives during the spring and summer months. Right now, Captain, the house cat is using it as his extra lounging area. They also have a coop that is home to nine hens. During warmer weather, the hens lay up to three-quarters of a dozen eggs on a daily basis. They share these with their clients for free. A portable outdoor canopy offers shade from the heat and has tables and chairs set-up for relaxation.

The third-floor is considered to be Liz's residential and office quarters. She came down intermittently to do some laundry and keep an eye on the kitchen proceedings. She also gave me one-on-one opportunities to talk about Shire House.

Interpretation and Analysis

Shire House is a primarily a residential program for high functioning individuals on the autism spectrum disorder. Their core mission is to create a core community that will serve as a place where they can learn to cultivate life-long relationships. Programs and training offered

include Executive Functioning Skills, Emotional Regulation, Social Interactions, Household Activities, Academic Support and Guidance, Physical Fitness, Therapeutic Services, Job Search Mentoring, Guidance, and Transportation. Some support services are provided through outside vendors or professionals who work with Shire House. These include the psychologists, Independent Living Support Therapists, and Fitness Instructors.

In order to qualify for services, Shire House's clients must be between the ages of 18 – 28 years old. They must be willing to find employment or get enrolled in college courses. Families or individuals who are interested in the program can check their web page – <https://shirehouse.org>. They can also reach out to or connect with Ms. Kane and her staff by phone and email. One can book a visit or tour by calling 1-408-489-3608 or emailing info@shirehouse.org. Consequently, Shire House holds monthly interest meetings for families and professionals who are curious and would like to learn more about their programs and services. This is held on the 4th Saturday of every month at around 2 to 4 pm.

Shire House offers limited scholarships through their network of loving and caring donors. Families and clients who are interested in the program may contact them for more information.

It is understood by both parties that when an individual and their family partake in the services offered, the end goal is a movement towards independent living. During the program, Shire House offers 24-hour residential support. Once completed, there is an available single-detached transitional living quarter at the back of the house. This is offered only to individuals who are ready to transition living on their own. Minimal support is available and provided on a case by case basis. Another option for individuals with ASD who have successfully finished their residential program is to take-part in Shared Housing. This program helps the clientele find their

own home/apartment on their own or with two other peers so that they can live independently with provisions for some financial help from their parents. They work with the landlords so that Shire House legally can handle the lease and manage the houses as part of the support system provided for their clients.

During the observation on Feb. 9th, the population on Friday Night Social was comprised of individuals in the 20-30 years of age. There was only one female client present. About 19-24 others were male. Some were current participants in Shire House's residential programs while others were considered alumni.

The clientele is made up of different races such as Whites, Asians, Europeans, and Hispanics. Some clients came from immigrant families and have identified themselves as Filipino-American, Chinese- American or Aryan.

Also during the observation, the staff on duty for Friday Night Social was comprised of two individuals – Meg and Nick. Meg is a full-time Social & Academic Mentor at Shire House. Nick is a former volunteer who is now a part-time employee. He works one day a week and supervises their Friday Night Social visitors and clients. Shire House has a full-time Program Director – Ms. Frances Burke who was off-duty at the time of observation.

Ms. Liz Sandoval Kane, Founder & Executive Director of Shire House resides on location. She was off-duty that but came down to check on the festivities throughout the evening and assisted her staff during the evening clean-up. She mentioned that she is mostly responsible for maintaining the house because they do not currently have a housekeeper.

Shire House's staff including the outside vendors and independent professionals they work with is made up of different races such as Whites, Hispanics, and African-Americans.

There are a host of benefits to being a client at Shire House. Shire House's staff, mentors, and volunteers are mostly made up of young adults who are in the same age-range as their clientele. This allows for relevant and authentic social-mentoring within the program. Since most of the volunteers are also college students themselves, Shire House's student clients are also able to get a realistic glimpse of organizational and study skills needed to succeed in their academic quest. Overall, Meg highlighted that having a small core of staff in Shire House ensures that everyone who works there is able to get to know each of their clients better.

Aside from the offered short-term and long-term residential and academic programs, Shire House gives families some peace of mind and provides their 18+-year-old clients' a haven for safe and consistent social opportunities during Friday Night Social. Every Friday, starting at 4 pm, Shire House opens its doors free of charge to their former and current clients, along with other young adults on the spectrum from the local community so that they can meet new friends and/or catch-up with old ones.

While dining on pizza and soda, these individuals can watch a movie, play board games and video games or just plain hang-out. The house is spacious and individuals who might prefer some quiet time can also spend time outdoors in the backyard/garden area. There, they can sit & relax under a makeshift gazebo or watch the chickens as they lounge in their coop. If they get lucky, Captain, Shire House's resident marmalade cat may grace them with his wonderful presence. During the warmer months, when the nine resident hens of Shire House are actively laying eggs, families, and individuals or families signed-up under Shire House programs may drop-by to get some in exchange for their choice of donation.

Shire House also has a Parents for Aspies support group that meets every 2nd Saturday of the month from 2 – 4 pm. and spacious enough to cater to 20-33 people and participate in these activities under one roof.

In the summer of 2017, on its sixth year of helping young adults w/ ASD, Shire House reached its full capacity for the first time. Liz felt the pressure of being understaffed. There were times when they do not have enough personnel or vehicles to cater to all their clients and their ever-changing schedules. It should be noted that Meg, a Social-Academic Mentor at Shire House, pointed-out the positive side of having a small number of staff members which leads to getting to know every client all the more.

Another difficulty that they encounter is with regards to their clientele's level of commitment to the program. There were instances when clients refuse to leave their room and work towards their goals. Liz mentioned that Shire House has month-to-month contracts which allow for a reasonable amount of time to establish relationships/rapport with their clients & families. Their focus is to help young adults on the ASD who have set their eyes on working hard to become independent.

Challenges also arise from different parental perceptions and aspirations with regards to getting into the residential track. Liz mentioned in an interview that there are parents who would need reminders to help set realistic life or career goals for their children. For example, landing a job at your favorite tech company within a 2-week period is most likely improbable.

Last, but not least, Liz identified the lack of Land Lords in the Bay Area that are amenable to their Shared Housing program for individuals who are ready to live on their own or

in a small group setting. This is one of the major reasons that drive Shire House's dream project of acquiring/running their own apartment complex.

Conclusion and Reflection

During the entire time I stayed at Shire House to observe and interact with the community of 20-25 young adults diagnosed with high functioning autism, I couldn't stop myself from feeling amazed at how almost all of them practiced age-appropriate and age-expected social interactions towards one another and new people. According to Haney (2013), one way of developing social competency among students with ASD is by encouraging appropriate "initiation and development of peer relationships" and Shire House seem to have succeeded in creating a venue for it.

Another thing I observed during Friday Night Social was how most of the individuals constantly self-regulated and utilized communication-based coping strategies and problem-solving skills. In the face of every day and sometimes unexpected problems, these individuals kept their emotions at bay and rationally went about steps to get things back in order. This made me reflect on the importance of explicit and targeted social skills training because it is part of what they need to assimilate into the community. Some of these skills include but are not limited to (1) initiating and maintaining conversations with others, (2) distinguishing when a person is joking from when they are being serious, and (3) tuning in to paralinguistic cues (O'Brien & Daggert, 2006).

As the evening wore on and my observation came to a close, I noticed a lot of Shire House's clientele leave on their own or with their Independent Living support therapists to drive them. Each of them carried a distinct air of self-assurance as they said goodbye to their peers and new

friends. It serves as a reminder for educators and families of students with ASD that we need to do our part to help train these individuals as best as we can to experience a degree of success in their adult life. As Howlin et al. (2004), pointed out in their study, the availability of supports and services for an individual on the ASD that help improve on their strengths and help diminish difficulties is a significant predictor of success as an adult rather than skills differences.

References:

An overview of Shire House's services (2017). Retrieved from YouTube:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OMbpKChQX7U>

Baum, J. (2015). *Willow Glen couple's generosity opens new doors for autistic adults*.

Retrieved from San Jose Mercury: <https://www.mercurynews.com/2015/12/09/willow-glen-couples-generosity-opens-new-doors-for-autistic-adults/>

Haney, M. (2013). *Understanding children with autism spectrum disorders: Educators partnering with families*. United States of America: SAGE Publications Inc.

Howlin, P., Goode, S., Hutton, J., & Rutter, M. (2004). *Adult outcome for children with autism*. *J Child Psychiatry*. February; 45(2): 212-229.

O'Brien, M., Daggett, J. (2006). *Beyond the autism diagnosis: A professional's guide to helping families*. Baltimore, Maryland: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.

Shire House. (Feb. 18, 2018). Retrieved from <https://shirehouse.org>