

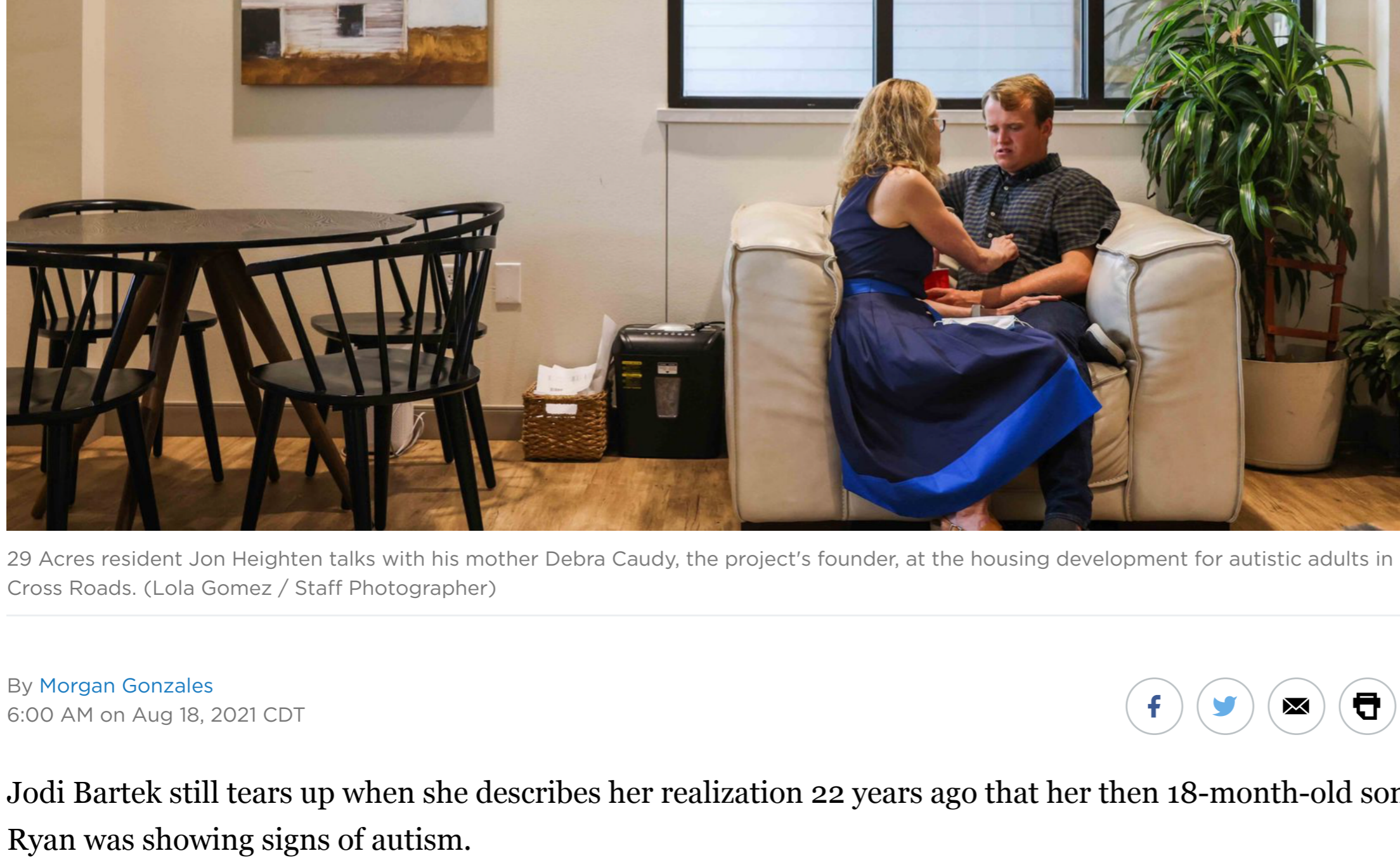
MORE FROM HOMEPAGE Suspect in fatal Methodist Dallas shooting on parole, at the hospital for birth of a child Our recommendation for Texas governor How Dak Prescott's return could solve one of the biggest weaknesses in Cowboys' offense Texas AG Ken Paxton leans into controversy, brushes off scandals as he vies for reelection

THIS IS MEMBER-EXCLUSIVE CONTENT

BUSINESS > HEALTH CARE

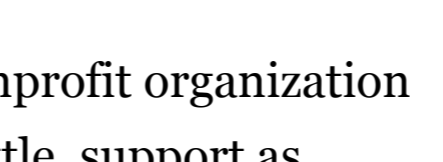
# At 29 Acres in Denton County, autistic adults are finding a home where they can live on their own

The unique project offers a summer camp-like experience and a two-year transition academy that teaches skills necessary to live independently.



29 Acres resident Jon Heighen talks with his mother Debra Caudy, the project's founder, at the housing development for autistic adults in Cross Roads. (Lola Gomez / Staff Photographer)

By Morgan Gonzales 6:00 AM on Aug 18, 2021 CDT



Jodi Bartek still tears up when she describes her realization 22 years ago that her then 18-month-old son Ryan was showing signs of autism.

"I always get that feeling in the gut with that memory," Bartek said. "We always thought Ryan would live with us until we're old and gray."

For Ryan and 31 other adults with autism or other developmental disabilities, a nonprofit organization called 29 Acres is giving them a chance to live independently with as much, or as little, support as needed.

Situated in Cross Roads, a small town on a major growth corridor in Denton County, 29 Acres consists of eight autism-friendly homes designed to create a communal living environment. It's bolstered by therapeutic support, partnerships with community organizations, employment resources and recreational activities.

So named for the acreage the complex is built on, the residential community opened to residents a year ago in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The grounds include a pool, hot tub, walking trail and community center, as well as an area for goats, alpacas and chickens that also call 29 Acres home. Residents and others not living on the premises can take part in a summer camp-like experience, activities including yoga and horseback riding, and a two-year transition academy that teaches skills necessary to live independently.

It's open to adults with a wide range of neurodivergent diagnoses — a broad range of disabilities that takes in everything from autism and Asperger's syndrome to attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and Tourette syndrome.



Debra Caudy, founder of 29 Acres, talks about the housing development for autistic adults created by parents of children with autism. (Lola Gomez / Staff Photographer)

## How it started

President and board chair Debra Caudy, a retired oncologist who lives in Dallas with her husband, came up with the idea for 29 Acres around 2011, when her son Jon was 14. Jon was diagnosed with autism at 2 years old and now lives at 29 Acres.

"We just started thinking about what's going to happen when we're too old, or when these guys aged out of the school system," Caudy said about the adults 29 Acres serves. "Probably 60,000 or more kids age out of the school system nationwide every year, and the services go away. They don't have places to go, they don't have employment, they don't have places to live or friends. It's a real problem."

A lack of services after high school is a real problem for adults on the spectrum, said licensed psychologist Stuart Robinson, who treats adults with autism at his independent practice, Live More Simply, in Dallas.

"The school system provides a structure that helps students get through ... because of American disability requirements," Robinson said. "As soon as those disability requirements go, there's not much incentive to provide services."

Bartek realized this would be a problem for her son after a visit with a family planner.

"He sat us down and said, 'When you're in your 70s, can you keep Ryan socially engaged, mentally active, physically active?' And we're like, we're kind of having trouble doing that now," Bartek said.

The family planner posed a difficult question for parents like Bartek. "He said, 'Is the time to move him out of the only house he's ever known when you die?'"



29 Acres resident Brandon Shoemaker spends time at the common area with Penny, the community dog. (Lola Gomez / Staff Photographer)

29 Acres became a solution and Bartek's son was the first to move in, followed by Caudy's son.

Residents receive differing levels of support based on their needs. Jon, who is functionally nonverbal, receives 24/7 supervision, but resident Brandon Shoemaker operates more independently. He has twice-weekly meetings with 29 Acres staff.

Shoemaker, 24, was one of the first to go through its transition academy program.

"We learned how to cook, plan for events, do taxes, budget, stuff like that. And then after two years of the program, we have a big graduation," Shoemaker said. "Some things I already knew. But some things I definitely learned, like budgeting and bills and stuff like that."

After graduating from the transition academy, Shoemaker's parents brought up the idea of moving to 29 Acres.

"I wasn't too excited, to be honest. But then I had an interview with Debra [Caudy]. And we discussed that there's going to be animals here. I'll make friends," he said.

Independent living was difficult at first, Shoemaker said. "The first maybe two weeks I missed family a lot," he said. "But then I just kind of grew into it."

When comparing life at 29 Acres to living at home, Shoemaker said he has more freedom. "For example, my mom would never let me play a rated M game. Now I can play a rated M game."

"So it's like college but not as free as college can be," Shoemaker said. "You can't have alcohol on the premises, stuff like that. So it's different from college, because in college you can make 'quote unquote' bad choices."

29 Acres has a no-alcohol rule to protect more vulnerable residents, Caudy said.

"The reason why we decided to not allow alcohol on site is because we have some clients, who, if they were offered alcohol, like my son, he might take it. And it wouldn't sit well with them," Caudy said. "Now, Brandon can go off-site. He's legal, and he can go get a beer."

Other rules in place are much like regulations at any apartment complex or living community. Those include quiet hours, a smoke-free policy and a pet policy.

"I mean, all in all, this is a great place," Shoemaker said. "If you have anyone that's autistic or special needs, assuming they have the money, they can drop them off here."



29 Acres chief operating officer Morgan McKay (left), founder Debra Caudy (center) and outreach coordinator Katelynn Andregg are among the more than 70 staffers involved in day-to-day operations. (Lola Gomez / Staff Photographer)



Caretaker Tanner Ledet (left) observes 29 Acres resident Jon Heighen drinking a cup of juice in the housing development's common kitchen. (Lola Gomez / Staff Photographer)

## The cost

29 Acres' ample services don't come cheaply. The nonprofit's operating budget comes in at over \$4 million a year, with a 2021 fundraising goal of over \$800,000.

"He's paying \$550 a month rent," Bartek said about her son.

"Then there's a community fee, which is hefty. It's the same for everybody, it's \$2,300 a month for the community fee. That's for you know, all of this," she said, gesturing around the community center. "And the vehicles, property manager activities, dog food, the goats."

Partial scholarships are available. Ten adults are on partial scholarships, totaling \$67,500 so far in 2021. "We can go up to \$200,000, this year," Caudy said. "So we still have some room."

29 Acres accepts private payments from clients as well as funding from services like Medicaid. It also files for insurance reimbursement for some behavioral therapy.

"We take both public funds and private funds to be able to cover the cost of what it takes to support someone 24 hours a day with autism," Caudy said. "We did comparative studies with other communities, not only in Texas, but outside of Texas, and we're basically in line with what other people charge."

Getting those public funds can be difficult for Texans, however.

"Medicaid waiver waitlist of funding is a 15-year waitlist," said chief operating officer Morgan McKay. "And so for people to access state funding, it's really difficult to do. That's a huge hurdle to come across right now."

To provide 24/7 support year-round, 29 Acres relies on a staff of more than 70. One is outreach coordinator Katelynn Andregg, whose younger sister is on the autism spectrum.

"I know when my sister gets older, and she's out of high school, I'm going to want her to be in a very similar program where she's able to be active in the greater community and be more independent," Andregg said.

Awareness is the first step to improving options for developmentally disabled adults, she said.

"We need people to be aware there are no services for these adults. And we have these adults with autism and neurodiversity [who] want to be contributing members of society," she said. "But they need assistance along the way."

The assistance 29 Acres offers is in high demand. It has a waitlist of 15 people and two new houses are being built. But Caudy said the community likely won't grow much.

"I am fearful of getting too big and just having the quality slip," she said.



Chickens and goats share the grounds with residents of 29 Acres in Cross Roads. (Lola Gomez / Staff Photographer)

By Morgan Gonzales, Staff writer. Morgan Gonzales is a business reporter covering health care and medical topics. She is a master's student in the Health and Medical Journalism program at Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Georgia.

@MorganGonzales

Business Briefing Become a business insider. Get the latest headlines delivered to your inbox every weekday. Email Address [input] [button]

Real. Local. Journalism. Stand with us in our mission to discover and uncover the story of North Texas. BECOME A MEMBER >

THE LATEST Suspect in fatal Methodist Dallas shooting on parole, at the hospital for birth of a child BY MICHAEL WILLIAMS

Our recommendation for Texas governor BY DALLAS MORNING NEWS EDITORIAL OPINION MEMBER EXCLUSIVE

How Dak Prescott's return could solve one of the biggest weaknesses in Cowboys' offense BY MICHAEL GEHLKEN

Texas AG Ken Paxton leans into controversy, brushes off scandals as he vies for reelection BY LAUREN MCGAUGHY AND ALLIE MORRIS MEMBER EXCLUSIVE

Wynonna Judd and Trisha Yearwood pay tribute to Naomi Judd at sold-out Dickies Arena show BY NATALIE WEINER

MOST POPULAR ON DALLASNEWS.COM

1 Our recommendation for Texas governor

2 Police identify suspect in Methodist Dallas hospital shooting that left 2 dead

3 Suspect in fatal Methodist Dallas shooting on parole, at the hospital for birth of a child

4 Wynonna Judd and Trisha Yearwood pay tribute to Naomi Judd at sold-out Dickies Arena show

5 Best CBD Dog Treats in 2022 - Top 5 Healthy Treats For Pain & Anxiety

6 We recommend for Texas lieutenant governor

Table with 5 columns: COMPANY, ADVERTISE WITH US, BUY, CUSTOMER SUPPORT, WEBSITE SUPPORT. Includes links for contact, careers, FAQ, advertising, and support services.