

Walking the Talk: The Importance of Inclusion and the JESPY Center

by Zoila Jennings

As a South Orange resident, my family and I chose this neighborhood because of its values as a welcoming community. We are a Black Latine household, and one of our two daughters is neurodivergent. (Definition: [Neurodivergent](#))

When we first moved here, we reveled in the diversity that defined our neighborhood. For us, that meant ensuring that all our overlapping and interdependent identities of race, ethnicity, and sensory processing differences were nurtured, respected, and valued. JESPY House was an integral part of creating our sense of belonging.

My husband's volunteer work at JESPY House deepened our appreciation of JESPY clients, allowing our family to forge meaningful connections and witness firsthand the invaluable contributions of JESPY clients to our community.

However, over time I have noticed that as a community we are not as far along as I expected when it comes to creating a nurturing environment for people of all abilities. I have often felt excluded and cannot attend many of the popular festivals such as Spooky Spiotta on Halloween because the spaces are overwhelming to my daughter. In fact, we have felt completely isolated from our neighbors and community, because of a lack of inclusive safe spaces.

As a community, we must strive to be inclusive and welcoming to all, including adults with intellectual disabilities. The JESPY Center represents a crucial step in this direction, offering that safe space, including affordable housing, employment training, and essential services to enable individuals to remain active and engaged members of our community who serve as role models for our children. As a parent, I am deeply invested in creating a community where my daughters can witness firsthand the values of inclusivity, compassion, and support.

The JESPY Center embodies these ideals, not only for JESPY clients, but also for all who call South Orange home. By including them, you are including me.

I look forward to the Planning Board approving this project so that it can move forward. This is a crucial step where the Planning Board can model equity and inclusion during key choice points that model the values of our town. I urge our community to rally behind the JESPY Center and support its development – reaffirming our commitment to building a community where everyone is valued, supported, and celebrated.