



OJAKIAN
COMMONS



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When
the
stars
align...

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When asked what inspired National MS Society, Connecticut Chapter, President and CEO Lisa Gerrol to pursue the creation of a housing facility for people living with multiple sclerosis, one story in particular always comes to her mind.



It was early in my career with the Society, I might have been only a week on the job in fact, when I received a phone call from a woman named Gloria,” she’ll start.

That first call from North Haven’s Gloria Litsky came two decades ago. She was calling about her then 33-year-old daughter, Cynthia Fiore, who had been diagnosed with MS at the age of 28.

“Gloria explained that her daughter had been a dancer in her early 20s, but was already quite disabled as a result of her MS, and how she feared that she might not be able to care for her on her own anymore,” said Gerrol. “She wanted to know what we could do to help her daughter.”

So the new president went to the Chapter’s Director of Programs, Susan Raimondo, to ask what options were available for the young woman. Quickly and unfortunately, Gerrol learned there was nothing she could offer the concerned woman other than an unfitting placement in a nursing home.

“I got a call from Gloria often, every six weeks or so,” said Gerrol. “And each time I was moved by this mother who wanted nothing more than to find support for her daughter. As a mother of a daughter myself, her pleas for help really resonated with me.”

From those conversations with Litsky, a great need was unearthed. Gerrol had taken on her position at the Connecticut Chapter with the goal of making a difference in people’s lives, and creating a supportive housing community for people living with disabilities was clearly something for which she needed to fight. But little did Gerrol know just how long the road ahead would be.

In 2011, Gerrol and her colleagues met with Governor Dannel P. Malloy and his staff to explore special needs housing for adults with multiple sclerosis. This led to exploratory meetings with the Connecticut Housing Finance Authority, the Connecticut Department of Social Services and the Connecticut Department of Economic and Community Development.

Ojakian Commons features a variety of shared common areas including a library, fitness center, community room, community garden and entertainment and technology center.

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Among the many accessible features of Ojakian Commons is the specialized entry into each apartment. Residents will have their own automatic door opener, very similar to the key fob used for cars.

“Each time I went to one of these meetings with the state, I brought along a photograph of Gloria and Cynthia that I kept on my desk,” said Gerrol. “I wanted to be sure that the people who could help us make a change didn’t think of me asking for help. This was about Cynthia, her needs, and the needs of others living with MS.”

Then, the National MS Society, Connecticut Chapter, found Regan Development and the two entities joined forces with one goal in mind: developing the first supportive, affordable and accessible independent living apartment complex specially designed for individuals living with MS in Connecticut.

It was a long time coming, but ultimately the stars aligned. For the first time, 40 affordable housing rental vouchers were designated to a specific housing complex, and the facility was awarded state tax credits for each unit set to house people living with disabilities.

“When we were working on establishing the Mandell MS Center, it was Joyce Mandell who said that all the stars were aligned perfectly,” shared Gerrol. “For me, that really means it was all about the connections and the same thing happened again with our housing project. We found the right people to be involved who shared a common goal of making this dream a reality. At each meeting I encountered people who were all-in, and that’s when I started to see that this was really going to happen.”

Today, the barrier-free apartments include many features above and beyond Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requirements, including automated door openers, 42-inch wide doorways, hardwood and ceramic tile floors, custom horizontal sliding windows for easy opening, fully accessible kitchens, bathrooms and much more.

“We are thankful to all those who played an important role in helping make this much needed facility a reality for people living with disabilities,” said Gerrol. “MS is a difficult, unpredictable disease that when it strikes, affects the entire family. With that in mind, one name stood above the rest when I began to think about what to officially call the building.”

Mark Ojakian has been a tireless advocate for individuals living with and affected by MS. In his role as a member of the Connecticut Chapter’s Board of Trustees over the past 10 years, he has helped raise critical funds to support local programs, such as crisis financial assistance

and care management. He has also served as an eloquent community ambassador, heightening local awareness of the effects of this potentially debilitating and lifelong disease.

In addition to being a strong supporter of the Society at the capitol, Ojakian clearly understands the impact MS has on a family. After years of combatting unpredictable physical symptoms, in 1974, at the age of 44, his father, Gene Ojakian, was diagnosed with MS. The next 30 years saw a steady decline in Gene's health, mobility and independence. Sixteen years following Gene's diagnosis, the Ojakian family received more devastating news. Mark's younger brother, Paul, was also diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, followed two years later by his only sister Cathy's diagnosis.

"Being personally affected by this disease opened my eyes to the many other people that are affected by it and the obligation we have to help people manage it," said Ojakian. "While my family and I are flattered by this recognition, the real champions are the countless people who care for people affected by MS and other debilitating disabilities. The more we raise awareness, the stronger our fight to cure these diseases will be."

Sadly, Gene Ojakian lost his 50-year battle with the disease in June of 2013. Both Paul and Cathy continue to struggle with escalating symptoms. Facing such a hardship, Ojakian was visibly touched to learn that Gerrol chose to name the facility in honor of his family's battle.

"I am extremely proud to have been involved with this project and am pleased to have the opportunity to honor the Ojakian family for their unwavering, continued support by officially naming the building Ojakian Commons," said Gerrol. "Accomplishing a project that affords people living with MS in our community the ability to live independently has been a primary goal of mine for the past 20 years and now, when I see it, it's incredible. It's a symbol of another need our Chapter is beginning to meet here in Connecticut."

Proving that time changes all things, this July, the first residents moved into Ojakian Commons, the second facility in the U.S. specifically designed by Regan Development Corporation for people living with multiple sclerosis. While the project was not completed in time to offer housing to Cynthia, it is now available to meet the needs of those who are in her place, today.



The image of Gloria Litsky and daughter Cynthia Fiore still holds a prominent place on Gerrol's desk, alongside a photo from the Ojakian Commons Construction Celebration from June 2014.

Special Recognition of Our Supporters at Ojakian Commons

Joan A. Baker Entertainment & Technology Center

*Funded by Henry Baker, Jr., Jack Baker,
and Peter Baker*

Jennifer Hawke-Petit Community Room

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