



YAI AND THE POWER OF BELONGING IN ROCKLAND COUNTY

BY JOSHUA NATOLI | PHOTOS PROVIDED BY YAI ROCKLAND



In every corner of Rockland County, there are quiet forces helping people live fuller, more independent lives. One of those forces is YAI, an organization that has spent nearly 70 years advocating for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities and giving them the tools, support, and confidence to thrive.

For Regional Director Kathryn "Kathy" Schiavi, who oversees all of YAI's Hudson Valley programs, the mission is personal. She joined the organization 32 years ago as an overnight support professional because she wanted to help people lead meaningful lives. Today, she leads a region that supports thousands of individuals and families — but the heart of the work remains the same: dignity, growth, and inclusion. YAI began as a visionary idea from a Brooklyn couple who believed people with disabilities deserved more than institutional living. Their first program served just seven people. Today, YAI supports more than 20,000 individuals across New York, New Jersey, and California. In Rockland County alone, YAI provides residential homes, respite programs, and a robust employment program that connects individuals with jobs they love and where they flourish.

Those success stories are what fuel YAI's mission. Kathy shares the story of Jack, a Rockland resident who faced significant health and medication challenges this year. Most people would struggle to maintain stability through that kind of adversity. Jack didn't just stay afloat...he excelled. With support from YAI's employment team, he went from a transitional employee to a permanent position, earning praise from his supervisors and recognition across the region. This January, Jack will be honored at YAI's Leadership Summit, a moment that underscores his perseverance and the power of the right support system.

Another success came through YAI's Life Skills and Supported Employment programs. Mia, a high school student, spent the spring working at her local community center, helping with both arts-and-crafts groups and yoga classes. She discovered confidence, routine, and joy in being part of her neighborhood

fabric. Then there's Joey, who returned to YAI for his second summer of work experience. His first job at a major shoe store went so well that his department passed an audit with a near perfect score thanks largely to Joey's meticulous organizing. Now working at a doggy daycare three days a week, Joey is thriving in a job that taps into his enthusiasm and willingness to help. When the daycare hosts special event days, Joey volunteers to adjust his schedule to support the team. His employer, not surprisingly, is thrilled.

These are just a few examples of what YAI does every day. Their programs help people build skills, discover passions, and contribute meaningfully to their communities. And the support extends far beyond employment. YAI's Lady Godiva residence, the newest in Rockland, is home to six women whose lives have been transformed by supportive staff, companionship, and the dignity of independence. And the long-running Rockland Coffee House program, hosted weekly at the Hibernian House, gives adults with I/DD a place to socialize, practice independent living skills, and enjoy recreational activities in a warm, welcoming environment.

Kathy says none of this would be possible without the incredible staff in Rockland, some of whom have been with YAI for over 40 years. Their dedication has allowed programs to grow and relationships with neighbors to deepen. "We've been embraced everywhere our residences are located," Kathy says. "The people we support feel included and welcome — and that's everything." For neighbors who want to get involved, YAI welcomes support in many forms. They're always looking for local job opportunities for the people they support, as well as volunteer sites for individuals who want to give back. Community members can also volunteer directly with YAI, participate in advocacy efforts, learn more through training sessions, or make a contribution. Anyone interested can call Eti at 845-358-5700 ext. 1121 or visit yai.org/get-involved.

At its core, YAI is about belonging...making sure every person has a chance to live a full, connected life. And in Rockland County, where kindness and community run deep, that mission continues to grow stronger every day.