

## About: Colleen Rennie The Villages of Merici



Merici Build the Village



Merici Village Apartments



Rennie Family

Motherhood came to Colleen Rennie in 1980 when she adopted Jason at 22 months. He was a patient of hers at Crossroads Rehabilitation Center and had been in foster care since he was 14 months old. She knew he would have challenges growing up, as he had been coming in for therapy as a failure-to-thrive

infant. He benefited from many therapy interventions including occupational therapy, physical therapy and speech and language therapy.

He was enrolled in special education programming in the Washington Township schools. He didn't start reading until he was in high school and has always had challenges with money and math skills.

"Jason was always supported to be his own person and as parents we wanted him to be as independent as possible, but he will always need support with money management and financial matters, as he's vulnerable to being taken advantage of," Colleen said.

Jason enjoys the same things as his brothers and sisters and desires to have friends and family to share experiences with.

Looking into group homes for her son in 2005, Colleen was not impressed. After her son had graduated from high school, all of his friends had scattered. He was independent and first moved into an apartment, but had no friends. He did not know any of the other tenants and he had no connections to his neighbors. As Rennie put it, "Loneliness is the worst disability of all."

Jason then rented a house from his aunt and uncle near Butler University. They lived next door. Later, he moved to Lawrence.

Colleen and a group of 4 other families decided to create a place where adults could live in a "community within a community." They called the concept the Village of Merici, after Angela Merici, a 15th-century Italian woman who became known for her extraordinary service to the poor, the displaced, and other marginalized people. In 2007, they incorporated as a non-profit public charity that would serve all individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD).

For the next four years, the founders conducted research by visiting many residential facilities in Indiana, Ohio, and Kentucky. Colleen took note of the pros and cons at each facility.

By 2012, the Merici Village Apartments were built on the grounds of the former Fort Benjamin Harrison, using rental housing tax credits from Indiana Housing and Community Development Authority (IHCDA) in collaboration with Merchants Affordable Housing.

"At that time in 2012, we were able to designate all the units to be set aside for individuals with IDD," Colleen said. "The units were filled almost immediately."

*The mission statement says it all. The Village of Merici provides residential and community opportunities for adults with developmental disabilities that promote a strong sense of community. The desire to have individuals and families come together as a community to support one another in leading a self-directed meaningful life is our focus.*

The goal was, and still is, to help the residents feel connected and engaged with one another to develop natural supports as their parents pass away.

The success of the apartments has led to a waiting list of over 200, and with only a few people moving out in the past few years, this has led the Village of Merici to continue partnering with affordable housing agencies to offer more units in Indianapolis and Carmel. The current Rental Housing Tax Credit program requires that 25% of new units in the Community Integration model be set aside for adults with IDD. The other 75% are available to those without disabilities for an "integrated community."



Lawton Loop Merici



Lawton Loop 3 Buildings



Lawton Loop Parade Grounds

The Village of Merici is a busy community. The building has a library, a commercial kitchen, and activities throughout the week that residents can choose to attend. There are 5 book clubs in the area. Transportation to and from work used to be an issue for residents, as it was hard to trust random drivers. So in 2020, Merici City Rides was launched. It is a transportation program that matches volunteer drivers with the supported residents to improve access within the Indianapolis area.

Jason is now 43, and with supports from the Village of Merici, he has lived in his own apartment in Lawrence since 2002. He has received supports from the Village of Merici since 2012. Prior to that, he had services from other providers. He enjoys building complex Lego cars and houses, hanging out with friends, and working part-time for the Garrison. He has two brothers, Charlie, age 40, and Matthew, age 28, and a sister, Sarah, age 30.

"We know his brothers and sister will continue to support him emotionally but we know they have or will have families and we want to make sure Jason is set up with the necessary supports as he and we age," Colleen said. "We have established financial guardianship and a special needs trust through The ARC to care for his future needs."

You can learn more about Jason in his "I am Home" video. <https://youtu.be/6TjQYHm8eE> or view those of other individuals that Village of Merici supports at <https://villageofmerici.org/i-am-home>.

Colleen's vision has helped to change the lives of many adults with IDD. "I am most proud of the fact that we have accomplished a sense of community and support among the people we support. We assist them in self-advocacy and making choices that they want in order to live their best lives. The friendships and engagement that have developed with the people we support, and the level of independence they achieve is phenomenal."

To learn more about the Villages of Merici: [www.villageofmerici.org](http://www.villageofmerici.org) | 317-292-9408  
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