

# ***Ridgeview Chelan – creating a no-compromises life for Special Needs Adults***

Autism Speaks House to Home Prize Entry

**Introduction.** As parents of a special needs son our goal is to help facilitate the best life possible for him. With that goal in mind, we began a multi-year project to determine what that might look like starting in 2013. The exercise started as a compilation of the things we would want for him if there were absolutely none of the concerns that create compromises or seem like obstacles. We specifically ignored concerns over cost, the time to get it done, and the exact type of care our son might need at different points in his life to determine the high-water mark of what might be possible. After that, it became a challenge to see how close to the high-water mark we could reach.

We found we could indeed accomplish our goal. All assumptions that anything in life was out of reach for him or the others involved in our project because they have autism or any other special needs were discarded in the end. Here are some of the goals we believe we will attain:

- Life that is active and full, with recreational opportunities and activities. Beyond inclusion, it is about being immersed in the spectrum of life on earth.
- The joy of work, achievement and subsequent prosperity being available without regard to a special need.
- Great opportunities to forge strong, lasting friendships.
- Families as key catalysts in people's lives, and particularly important for those with special needs.
- Something truly sustainable, with no reliance on government programs or the charity of others.
- Not only be included, but being valued members of the local community.
- Having the opportunity to not only be productive and accomplished, but be high earners.

That last bit is important and something that even family members of persons with special needs can have a hard time accepting; that their family member is truly capable of great things and can earn a handsome income. Obtaining all the other things we wanted for our son takes resources, quite a bit of money actually. That focused us on facilitating a solution that allows the residents of our project to generate the income it takes to have a life without compromises. While that seems pretty basic to me, it turns out to be more than a bit revolutionary.

**First, a little about us.** We live in a small town, on a big and beautiful lake in central Washington State. The climate is high desert, with low humidity, hot summers and cool winters. The lake, [Lake Chelan](#), is rimmed with mountains and its depths (up to 1500 feet deep) filled with crystal clear water that cascades off the mountains and glaciers. Yes, it is one of the most spectacular places on earth.



The whole valley has about 8,000 full time residents but can swell to as many as 30,000 people during the peak tourist months. We have lived here just over 10 years. It is beautiful, pretty much paradise. People from all over the northwest visit regularly and many have second homes here. What's more, our son is a star in this town. People love his happy, enthusiastic way. While I know most of the population, he probably knows even more folks than I do and they support and cherish him. Yep, since it is pretty much paradise anyway, it seems to us like the perfect place for a home for people with special needs. Here is the view towards downtown and Lake Chelan from the Ridgeview site:



***The Idea Begins to Gel.*** My wife and I were trying to envision what our son's life might look like.

As older parents, we also knew that much if not most of his life would be independent from ours. We started by visiting all the existing homes for folks with special needs we could see over a couple years' time. We were fortunate in that a variety of very innovative homes existed in the towns of Leavenworth and Ellensburg which are just a few hours from us. Many of the homes had various things we liked. All of the people we met were passionate about housing issues for people with special needs and happy to help and share expertise.

One of the homes in Leavenworth in particular is a really happy place. It is set up as a group home but it also includes a vocational aspect. They have a contract to assemble jump ropes for a local company that manufactures and sells tournament jump ropes all over the world. The home has 5 residents with Downs Syndrome, Autism and other special needs. Those guys are the "5 amigos" and have become fast friends. They, and several other employees with special needs, assemble the jump

ropes under contract. They also independently travel several towns away to go bowling each Saturday and earn money to take vacations they plan together each year. They have a great time and a great life!

The jump rope assembly is a very social group activity that can be mostly done around a big table. It is fun, engaging and a single vocational specialist can keep a couple handfuls of special needs workers productive and focused.

But, regulations like minimum wage laws, state unemployment insurance, industrial insurance and more make the business aspect of it difficult. The jump rope company only pays as much as it would cost for them to have the products contract assembled elsewhere. That ends up being about half of the required minimum wage that has to be paid to the workers. Expenses for unemployment, industrial insurance, and other taxes add up. Plus any monies over \$85 earned each month are subtracted from the disability payments the residents get by Social Security. Those disability payments are what pay for the residents' caregivers, so they have to be made up. So, the owners of this wonderful home end up fundraising a few dollars for each dollar they pay in wages through a charitable organization. It is a major undertaking. However, they believe that providing a work experience and the self-esteem that comes with it, is worth the effort. I have to agree, but the sustainability of that program when that one set of parents is no longer there to do fundraising is an issue.

There are similar issues with the regulations for group and adult homes in Washington. While these regulations are well meaning and probably necessary in many cases, the overhead to file the required reporting and dealing with inspectors and the Department of Social and Health Services is a big deal and takes a bunch of resources. They really provide no benefit for what we want to do and they contribute to the difficulty and expenses of creating and maintaining a sustainable home.

After Leavenworth, came a couple of very useful visits to a home in Ellensburg. One of their founding parents is also a senior attorney at one of the largest law firms in the state. He studied the issues that make projects for adults with disabilities so difficult to pull off and devised methods to reduce the amount of effort spent dealing with bureaucracy so the focus can be on creating the best project possible.

He found that if the residents owned their own home, they no longer came under the purview of Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) as a Group or Adult Home. A home for special needs adults simply becomes a single family home. In Ellensburg, their group built a beautiful, luxurious home with a swimming pool on acreage outside of Ellensburg. While it exceeds all the DSHS requirements for a Group or Adult Home it is not burdened with all the reporting or the inspection requirements. It is not run by a third party who charges a monthly rent like a group home, but managed by the owners who are the families, guardians and trustees of the residents.

They also created a vocational program growing organic herbs in their greenhouses for sale to restaurants and at the farmers' market. Once again, their attorney parent figured out if the residents

own the business, regulations like minimum wage, unemployment and industrial insurance don't apply making it much easier to create a sustainable business.

The herb business is a break even to moderate income proposition. Their home cost over \$1 million to build, so the buy-in for each of the families is several hundred thousand dollars. Even after that, the residents need to have trust funds that cover their living costs and maintenance costs for the home. So, the residents are almost exclusively coming from wealthy backgrounds. They still have plenty of demand and it is a wonderful place to be. It is just not accessible to a broader audience.

Through our travels and visits, we ended up with a list of things we wanted to do from our experiences as well as some additional things we thought of as improvements for our project, Ridgeview Place in Chelan.

**The Concept.** From what we saw, there were many ideas we wanted to incorporate. Yes, we wanted a beautiful, luxury home with high quality finishes, a raised floor theater room, fitness center and space. We also wanted a shop and work area on the site as well for the vocational side of the home. The location needed to be close in to town, ideally walking distance to downtown so the residents could easily be a part of the community. It isn't easy finding a large enough lot that was also close in to town, but neither is it impossible.



[click for larger image](#)

We really liked the home in Ellensburg and hired the same architect to design Ridgeview Place. The main floor came to about 4900 square feet with a daylight basement of just over 2200 square feet. The main floor has four resident suites. Each suite is spacious, with room for a large bed, additional furniture, a desk, walk-in closet and a private bathroom.

## Ridgeview Place | Autism Speaks House to Home Prize Entry



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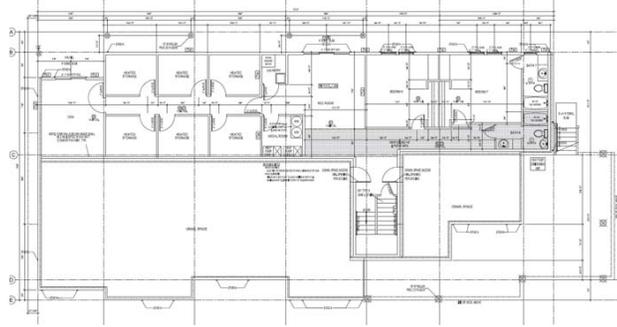
There is also a private apartment type space for live-in caregivers with everything in the resident suites plus a living room, double sinks, sitting room and covered deck. There is a great room with fireplace and an open kitchen with a huge island, double dishwashers, and pantry plus outside living and dining space. Yes, there is a raised floor theater room plus a laundry room with double machines. All the primary living activities occur on the main floor.

The home is configured and wired to make it as easy as possible to provide every level of care the residents could need during their lifetimes. You cannot yet see it in the plans, but there is a video and motion detection system that compliments the layout of the home to allow the caregivers to be able to identify where everybody is and their status from anywhere on the property. Family and/or guardians can log into the system at any time to be able to see what is going on at Ridgeview Place.

Regarding the different levels of care that are being judged as different classes in the House to Home contest, we are setup to seamlessly provide all three levels that are being judged, from 24 hour care to daily care and occasional care. That has nothing to do with the contest. It has to do with our belief that none of the residents should have to move from their home due to varying levels of care they may need as they age. The home is designed to support care levels to full-time nursing care if needed. The plan is for this home to be able to support its residents' needs for their entire lives.

It is all ADA compliant and wheel chair accessible as well as having a fire suppression system and backup power generation. The downstairs has a large fitness room, 6 heated storage areas (1 for each of 4 residents, 1 for the caregivers and 1 for the house). There are also two hotel like bedrooms downstairs for visiting family or use by interns or additional care givers that may be helping at Ridgeview Place.

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The detached shop is 3000 square feet and is setup for warehouse and office type of space.

This is a beautiful project, with slab counters, and high end finishes that anybody would find luxurious and comfortable. There are no compromises for the residents here because they have autism or special needs. They will have their own home that rivals the most luxurious homes in the area.

That is the “hardware” side of it. But, the “software” side is where the real innovation begins that makes it all possible.

The ownership of Ridgeview Place will be by an LLC. Each resident, often through their family or trust, owns 25% of the shares of the LLC. There is an operating agreement that controls how residents enter, and exit if necessary, Ridgeview Place LLC.

The business side of it, a company called Lakeline LLC, is to be similarly structured. Each resident will be a 25% owner of the business through their family or trust.

Lakeline LLC started shipping products in the sporting goods market in June of 2015. It has already become profitable in 2016 and will add lighting products to its portfolio of things it makes and does. By the time Ridgeview Place is ready to be occupied, there will be an available and significant income stream available to the resident owners.

A big part of the Special Sauce that makes Ridgeview Place different from any of the other homes we know of is that Lakeline LLC, and the resident owners of Ridgeview Place, have their own unique, proprietary and profitable business that makes and sells its own products. Our residents aren’t just compensated by the worth of their hourly labor, but are compensated for the full value and margin their products bring to the public. We are creating a home and work environment that is entirely capitalistic in nature. We are not seeking government funding nor are we seeking donations from the public.

Our family background probably helps. I am an engineer and entrepreneur who has created several product companies throughout my career. In the 1996 I created a lighting company that is still very successful today which I sold in 1998. My wife, Denise Lorenz, also has her own company that builds

cellular and telecom infrastructure in several western states. We are pretty comfortable and skilled at setting up and operating profitable businesses.

The products we are choosing at Lakeline LLC have relatively long lives in that the demand for them should span decades. The margins on the products we are creating are also very attractive. The bottom line is that we are creating a company that will provide six figure incomes for the residents of Ridgeview Place for many years. The concept is the income generated will allow a family to buy into the home at Lake Chelan for their family member and be paid back, if desired, in a year or three. Further, their family member can generate their own sizable trust fund in the next 5 to 10 years that would be able to sustain them for their lifetimes in what is a very luxurious lifestyle.

Plus, we have work that is fun to do for any skill level. We contract out the most industrial parts of our products: machining, plastic molding, anodizing, plating, stamping, etc. That still leaves packaging, light assembly, customer service, shipping, warehouse work and even things like marketing and product design. The work is social, can be kitted and broken down into daily tasks for anybody's appropriate skills and interest. While the work can be made into tasks for those with limited skills, there are no limits to what skills and achievement levels are available to the resident owners of Ridgeview Place and the additional employees it takes to make it all play.

And, if the folks living there want to do other things for a career, Ridgeview Place sits on a 3.5 acre site that is a 15 minute walk to downtown. Bus service is a few hundred yards away. Lake Chelan is not only a resort community, but is known for its agriculture as well. Historically, fruit orchards have been the primary crops but in the last 15 years it has been changing into an area renowned for its wineries as well. The acreage surrounding Ridgeview Place will be planted in grapes and, for now, leased to a local winery. There are opportunities in the vineyard business for the residents as well as in many of the businesses in the area.

Coupling a profitable business to a special needs home solves a host of problems. The biggest is sustainability. Financially, Ridgeview Place should be sustainable no matter what happens to government or charity programs. Yes, residents can still qualify for things like disability payments and other benefits, but if those programs change or go away they are still secure in their home and lifestyle. One side benefit to being business owners is that much of their compensation can be paid in dividends directly to their trusts which don't impact their benefits like typical wages.

And yes, this is replicable. Entrepreneurship can be the key to creating fabulous lifestyles for anyone, and it is particularly powerful as a way to provide for individuals with Autism or other special needs. It only takes going beyond the assumption that the individuals involved are not able to generate lots of financial resources, because they can in the right environment. By looking carefully to develop a fun work environment that is also highly profitable, the solution becomes much easier.

In a more urban environment, the live/work space would be configured differently, but is still very practical.

We have ended up with a project that goes well beyond “inclusion.” The residents are right in the middle of real life, dealing with a variety of people every day. Their home is nestled in a small town where they are not only welcomed but are appreciated with friends they see daily that are enthusiastic about their presence. Their business operates normal business hours 5 days per week, just like the real world because it is the real world. This is a full immersion into life, without leaving out the best parts nor the bits that require effort, for people with autism and other special needs. All the while, they have the support they need for daily living and success in actual careers.

**Project Status.** We are moving this project right along. In December of 2014, we started the process with tangible actions. The business was formed and I started designing products. Our first products shipped in June Of 2015 and by the end of that year, the business was breaking even. It has become profitable the first couple of month of 2016 and will easily be quite profitable for the rest of the year.

A 3.5 acre site was identified and purchased in the summer of 2015 that exceeded our goals of having the space we desired while being close into town. Design of Ridgeview place began in the fall and plans were submitted for permit in December of 2015 and a contractor was hired. The plans were deemed complete in February and the permit is forthcoming shortly.

In November, [a web page for Ridgeview Place](#) was formed and we have started getting the word out to other families of special needs adults.

It is expected that the permit will be issued in March of 2016 and a ground breaking ceremony will be scheduled when the weather permits the commencement of construction.

Ridgeview Place should be ready for occupancy around the end of 2016 or thereabouts.

From there, we will slowly bring the residents together. Our residents will be unique as well. With the families of the residents being the trustees of both the home and the business, we need other families who embrace the business aspects to keep it all going, prosperous and fun.

We will be seeking both residents and families that will help sustain the vision of creating the most fulfilling life possible for the residents of Ridgeview Place even long after folks like I am no longer around to be part of it.

The first products we are producing at Lakeline LLC are sporting accessories. The company will expand into other products in 2016. But, the areas of business have to be chosen carefully to be both practical and generate the types of income we are looking for. The typical products we will produce are relatively small, highly profitable, easy to market and do not become obsolete quickly. We will be looking for residents with families and support systems that understand the business side of things as well.

***The Question I am Often Asked.*** We are fortunate and have been blessed with success in life. When telling people about this project, they eventually get around same question. Here is [the question and answer that I put on the Ridgeview blog](#):

We had some friends over for dinner and were chatting about our Ridgeview Place project. One of them asked my why our son doesn't just live with us (as his autistic grandson lives with his son's family).

It is a good question. It is certainly something we could do. We have plenty of room for our son.

So, I explained why our son could have a much better life living more independently with his own circle of friends, his own achievements and his own path in life.

This project is not just about our son having a place to live when we can no longer care for him. It is about creating a more fulfilling life than he would have living at home with us. That is what we want to do, help him create both his own home and path in life, in an environment that helps him be very successful.

Ridgeview is about creating a community, basically a special type of family, to share life with. Our son needs peers in his life to share experiences with, challenge each other and grow together. The environment we are creating will allow our son to progress without bounds on what he can achieve and become. That is what we want for our son. We have seen some great examples of the types of "family" that this type of home can provide in our research.

It is also about providing meaningful and productive work so our son is a contributing member of society. We want him to have opportunities to earn and the self-esteem that comes from pulling his own weight.

Our son is an integral member of the Lake Chelan community. He knows and enjoys a broad swath of friends and he spreads his own brand of joy throughout the town. Ridgeview Place is designed to encourage such a fully integrated approach to life in a community that supports it wholeheartedly.

Sure, like most all special needs parents, we do have concerns about what happens to our son after we are no longer around to, or able to, care for him. Having to place him in a rush due to a circumstance like failing health would not allow us to be sure we had a stable, happy, sustainable environment for our son.

The bottom line answer to my friend's question is living at home would limit our son's life and opportunities to our schedule and abilities. We want him to experience so much more!

Ridgeview Place is a solution that provides a stable, rewarding and more challenging life in a loving and caring environment well beyond the experience our son would have living at home.

We are seeking other potential resident owners, so if you have a special needs family member or know of one and want to learn more, [talk to us about joining us on our journey.](#)

***Ridgeview Place and the Judging Criteria.*** Here is how Ridgeview Place fits into the judging criteria for the Autism Speaks House to Home Prize Entry:

- Ridgeview Place is planned to have caregivers on site 24 hours each day. The care will be provided by a combination of resident caregivers plus shift work. Potential residents of Ridgeview Place can have care needs from full-time to occasional. The project is designed so even as their care needs shift during their lives, they can still be accommodated at Ridgeview Place. The home is wheelchair accessible and has **24/7 support, daily support** and **weekly support (support needed a few times per week, but not every day)** available.
- Ridgeview Place ***solves a piece of the need for housing and/or services*** by providing a fully integrated home, range of career options and income in a lifestyle that immerses the residents in real life without limits in a recreational mecca with an enthusiastically supportive community.
- ***Quality of Life at Ridgeview*** is approached by considering all the aspects of what makes a great life. Opportunities and the facilitation of creating a close network of peers and friends, integrating family access and assuring financial sustainability are all aspects of life that Ridgeview Place addresses in creative ways. The design of the home, the caregiving and the small town environment provide a depth of support for the residents that is truly rare. Further, the home is configured to be an effective and luxurious home for almost any age and level of disability.
- ***Learning*** about Ridgeview Place can be done in part from this contest entry, but I would also encourage you to see what we are building, watch it come together and please stay in touch with how this project works. We are passionate about the capability for including people with special needs as both high earning individuals and with the opportunities to do all the fun things anybody else in life can do. Ridgeview Place is about providing them the support they need to pull that off. By carefully selecting and facilitating a business as part of a living solution, the financial and sustainability aspects of providing a home for persons with Autism and/or other special needs can be addressed. We would love the opportunity to show you more of what we are doing as well as pick your brains on your thoughts about it.
- ***Implementable.*** We are in the implementation process at Ridgeview right now and there is nothing we are doing which is not an evolution or new combination of already proven concepts. We are truly just beginning, and there will be bumps along the way, but believe in 5 years we will have a lifestyle for people with special needs that we and the entire community will be very proud of.

**Gratitude.** Thank you for putting together this contest. Each step of our project has been aided by the kindness and enthusiasm of others with special needs or special needs family members. We truly value every contact we have made.

While the prize would be wonderful, we will also be thrilled to be able to learn about any of the innovations you uncover with your contest that we might be able to incorporate into our own project and lives.

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