

# A will finds a way at Chelsea ALS home

By Jason M. Rubin  
Special to the Advocate

It was not your typical open house, but then the Leonard Florence Center for Living in Chelsea has made it its mission not to be typical.

Last Friday, the center unveiled the Steve Saling Residence for people with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), also known as Lou Gehrig's Disease. Saling, 41, a landscape architect who hails from Marietta, Ga., played a major role in designing the first-of-its kind residence.

That was one reason why he led the tour. The other is that he is also a resident.

Saling was diagnosed with ALS four years ago, shortly after the birth of his son. Today, he can no longer speak, walk or use his arms and hands. Yet in the Florence Center – the newest of four facilities operated by the Chelsea Jewish Foundation on its senior-housing campus – he is able to live an independent and productive life.

"Some people when they're told they have ALS, they think of it as a death sentence," said Mike Saling, Steve's brother, who flew in from Jacksonville, Fla. "Steve never looked at it that way. He had a clear vision of what he wanted to accomplish."

The Florence Center is the first urban-based incarnation of the growing "green house" model of nursing home care. The movement aims to deinstitutionalize the structure of long-term care by creating homes that are focused on the wants and needs of the residents, rather



Steve Saling, who has ALS, shows off his new high-tech home to Governor Deval Patrick and the press.

than on the systems and schedules of the caregivers.

The Saling ALS Residence, for example, is homey, attractive, comfortable, and empowering. The 10 residents (each has his or her own private room) do what they like when they like. The Florence Center has its own café, kosher deli, day spa, and synagogue. In addition to the residence for people with ALS, the six-floor building has residences for people with multiple sclerosis as well as those who are blind, disabled or require short-term rehabilitation.

The Florence Center is outfitted with infrared sensors that residents like Saling can activate with their computerized wheelchairs. By moving his eyes, Saling sends commands to a com-

puter screen.

To get to the residence, located on the second floor, Saling wheeled his chair beneath an infrared sensor and, presto, the elevator was called. When we reached the second floor, he sent a signal to another sensor to open the doors to the residence.

"Welcome to my home," announced a computerized voice following a text that Saling had composed in advance for the tour. After showing off the living room, kitchen and dining room, he led the tour group into his bedroom.

On the walls were photographs of a different Steve Saling, showing him skydiving, painting and holding his son. The pictures of that Saling presented a stark contrast with the

one in the wheelchair. But Saling wasn't about to dwell on the dreadful power of ALS.

With imperceptible movements, he opened and closed the window blinds, and turned on the lights and the flat-screen television. A computerized voice, reciting Saling's prepared script, explained how he uses a harness suspended from a ceiling track to get from his chair to his bed or to the toilet or shower. He does require assistance to get into the harness.

"Steve was clear from the start that he never wanted to be a burden, that he wanted to be independent," said Terri Saling, an aunt. "By his example and his personality, he helped us get over the fear that he wasn't going to be there."

"His body is broken but his mind is fine," she said. "That's important for people

to know. You still can have a meaningful life."

That requires a strong will, which Saling has always had. And by sheer force of his indomitable spirit, he will be an inspiration to everyone on the campus (he has been known to do "wheelies" in the parking lot). But it also requires resources, support, and technology, which he now has thanks to the Florence Center.

Saling and Barry Berman, chairman of the Chelsea Jewish Foundation, plan to travel across the United States to raise awareness and money for more facilities like this one.

"Steve and Barry are a real odd couple," Terri Saling said with a laugh. "Barry is a Jew from the Northeast and Steve is a non-Jew from the South, but together, Steve's personality and Barry's compassion make them a good team."

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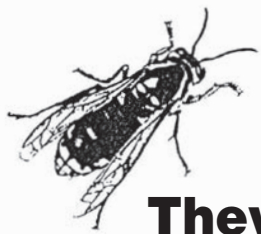
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