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**SELF-DIRECTION IN ACTION**

# Ralph's Story

**THANKSGIVING IS DAYS AWAY** and Ralph Belmont and Kara Younk's welcoming home in rural Leeds, Maine, glows with reminders of the season—cozy throws and pillows in autumnal shades, scented candles, family photographs, and above all, gratitude.

Ralph is settled in his wheelchair with Trixie, the family dog, by his side. Kara cheerfully moves around the living room re-arranging chairs for her guests while enthusiastically pointing out all of the improvements they were able to make thanks to Section 18. From the brand-new wheelchair ramp leading to the front door to the iPad station at the kitchen table to the baskets of physical therapy tools and assistive devices, their home is a place where Ralph—who had a traumatic motorcycle accident in 2021—can both heal and thrive.

"Ralph spent three-and-a-half months in the hospital after the accident," Kara explains. "It was during COVID, so it was incredibly hard to find any kind of rehab facility after discharge. They had all closed down. I decided to bring him home. He was doing so well here and when he was able to walk, they moved him from in-home therapy to outpatient. But it was still COVID and there wasn't enough outpatient therapy available through the week—just 30 minutes—and he started to decline. I needed to get him into regular rehab and there was none in New England. We had to send him all the way to Orlando."



While facilities in Florida were open they also faced staffing shortages and it became clear that Ralph was not receiving adequate care. "He drastically deteriorated," Kara recalls, voice trembling. "Six hospitalizations and he had to have his feeding tube reinserted. We had to fly him back to Maine to a facility an hour's drive from where we live."

Ralph was back in Maine but he wasn't yet home. "I was rotting there," Ralph says. When Kara was told about Self-Direction, she knew that was their way back. "We couldn't wait to get Ralph here," she says. "We had the day marked on the calendar."

In order to care for Ralph herself, Kara needed to invest in several critical upgrades for their living space. "We had to build the wheelchair ramp. We needed a handicap-accessible van, and a Sit to Stand lift to get Ralph in and out of his wheelchair. And the bathroom had to be modified to build a roll-in shower."

**"If Ralph had stayed  
in that facility,  
I know we would  
have lost him."**

# “Self-Direction can be a lengthy process but it’s most definitely worth it in the long run.”

Kara had her teenage son, Mason, and her job to think about as well. Self-Direction meant she didn’t have to shoulder all the responsibility alone. “We were able to hire help for when I need to run errands or take care of Mason,” she explains. “It’s good to be able to hire people you know and trust to help with your loved one. We’ve hired friends and family members, because that’s who he’s most comfortable with, but there’s also an app where you can find available caregivers.”

Most importantly, Self-Direction let Kara embrace her role as primary caregiver while still bringing in much-needed income. “We couldn’t exist on Ralph’s social security check alone,” she says. “Now I am a paid caregiver, which is amazing, because without that we could not have brought Ralph home. Wages in Maine are rough and Section 20 caregivers get excellent pay, which is great. And bringing him home ...” she stops suddenly, overwhelmed by emotion.

“The stress relief was immediate,” she affirms after a deep breath. “Just not needing to fly back and forth from Florida or spending two hours in the car to get him to therapy. Now, Ralph is getting stronger and almost out of his wheelchair. He’s made significant gains in outpatient therapy, he walks with a walker over 100 feet, and he stands on his own. When he first came back, it took three people to get him up.”

“She might not have believed it back then!” Ralph adds.

“Self-Direction is a game-changer for sure,” Kara agrees. “So much more freedom in your life. You can do what you want, when you want.”

Their days are filled with progress and togetherness. “We had a fun summer, didn’t we, Ralph?” Kara says eagerly. “We’ve been going to concerts because Ralph really enjoys his music. Chris Stapleton was one of our favorites, and Santana and the Blues Festival, and these are things that would have been almost impossible to do if he was still in the facility.”

And they are both still looking forward with optimism. “One of Ralph’s goals is to be able to drive again,” Kara shares. “Ralph is a very independent and stubborn person and he doesn’t want people to have to wait on him,” she laughs. “The more independent he can get the happier he will be.”

Both Kara and Ralph want anyone considering Self-Direction to know that it takes time to get the right pieces in place but it’s worth it. “Hang in there,” she urges. “It feels like it’s a lengthy process but it is most definitely worth it in the long run. We have a lot less stress—and a lot to look forward to.”

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