

Empty Stocking Fund: Greeley woman finds support system through Connections for Independent Living

By Kyla Skye Allmon For The Tribune

To 36-year-old Jennifer Henderson, finally having her own apartment means living an independent life. It means having the confidence in herself to overcome a disease she has battled since she was 9. Before moving out on her own, Henderson lived at Kenton Manor, 850 27th Ave. in Greeley. She had dropped down to 85 pounds and doctors at the eating disorder clinic where she was receiving treatment told her she couldn't live on her own. She would need to live with someone for support. "When I was 18, I found out about bulimia. When I was 9 years old, I didn't realize it was an eating disorder, it was just something I did," she said. Henderson was under the care of Kenton Manor for six months. "I just felt like the oddball because there are a lot of older people," she said. "I felt just different."

She reached out to Connections for Independent Living, 1331 8th Ave., to take the first step to living on her own again. Connections for Independent Living, which helps those with disabilities, is one of eight nonprofits that will benefit from the Northern Colorado Empty Stocking Fund this year. Kim Engell, the program director at Connections, has been Henderson's main support system. She met Henderson for the first time in November 2010 while Henderson was staying at Kenton Manor. Before Henderson could move out on her own, she had to get approval from her doctor. The doctor "wanted me to be there the rest of my life. There is no way I was going to do that, so I switched doctors," Henderson said. "She felt like I would relapse, and she wasn't willing to give me the chance. "That made me angry because I knew I wasn't going to go back to my eating disorder," Henderson said. "I was over it, I was recovered, and I wasn't going to go back to it." Henderson did not find it difficult to seek out another doctor. She began her quest to find an alternative doctor on the Internet, and Engell spoke with the Kenton Manor staff about Connections for Independent Living, where Henderson would have the outside support she needed. "Jennifer had to convince them that with the proper support, she could succeed living in the community," Engell said.

With the support of a new doctor and Engell, Henderson's confidence was regained. "We go out for lunch once a month, and we talk about everything, you know," Henderson said with a light-hearted laugh. Even though Henderson was motivated to be independent, fears did not leave her. "It was kind of nerve-racking because I was like, „what would happen if I did relapse?“ " she said. Engell continues to support Henderson, with everything from monthly lunches, to helping her with paperwork. Engell describes her support for Henderson as consistent and on the terms she needs. "I was in daily contact with Jennifer for the first month she moved out, which was in April 2011," Engell said. "After that, I was in contact at least weekly or as often as Jennifer requested." Outside of their lunches, Henderson calls Engell when she needs extra help or support. She is also receiving health and emotional assistance from other agencies. Henderson becomes more reserved, thoughtful and quiet when she thinks about the support she has received from Connections and Engell. "Just knowing that they're there for me helps me out, just because if I need anything, I know I can count on somebody."