

## Breaking down the walls

# A struggle for halfway houses

By PHIL ARKOW

The massive, three-story house in a quiet residential section of Glens Falls, N.Y., looked much like every other home on the tree-lined block. It was an older neighborhood, with large yards, detached garages, and ponderous old homes with two and three fireplaces.

Inside the house a feeling of warmth and comfort was pervasive. From the living room you could hear the throbs of an organ as it played behind an afternoon soap opera. The residents were waiting for their favorite television show, "General Hospital," to come on. A giant jigsaw puzzle was partially assembled on a table. Someone was just going to work, and someone else was just coming back from work. It could have been a sorority house.

But it was a strange group of sisters who lived in the house on quiet Ridge St. The house was home for 11 mentally retarded women, not quite ready to set off on their own.

There are a half-dozen such homes in New York State, and more are being used across the country. They demonstrate a change in perspective in the treatment of the mentally retarded, and a willingness of some to break down the walls of fear between the retarded and the rest of society.

Glens Falls is an exception. Downstate, White Plains residents fought against having a state school for the Westchester County area located nearby. In Brooklyn, plans for the first halfway house for the

New York City area, in the Flatbush area, were abandoned after a community protest that included numerous area psychiatrists.

But Glens Falls welcomed the halfway house when it opened last July, after a year of bureaucratic delays and budgetary confrontations. And

while "we're not yet at the stage where a neighbor will come over and ask to borrow a cup of sugar," says a home spokeswoman, the house does blend in with the rest of the block, and the women who live there are accepted.

### BEGAN IN 1970

The Glens Falls story began in July, 1970, when administrators at the state school for the mentally retarded in Wilton, 13 miles away, started looking for a halfway house to reintroduce a pilot group of its less brain-damaged residents to the outside world. Hospital care was not enough; success with the retarded is measured by returning them to useful roles in society.

A former nursing home in Glens Falls was selected as a probable site, but there was always the potential of community hostility.

So civic leaders, municipal officials and concerned citizens were invited to a meeting discussing the proposed home. "We wanted to be honest, so people wouldn't be afraid," recalled Mrs. Demie Riley, team leader in the home. "Until this past year or two there's been this terrible fear of the mentally retarded, that they're grotesque people. But the meeting was overwhelmingly successful, and they were willing to welcome us."

In December, 1970, New York State imposed a job freeze that left schools like Wilton short by up to one-fifth of their staff. The Halfway House was squelched, temporarily, though refurbishing of the building continued.

School administrators felt so strongly about the project that they maneuvered existing staff personnel despite the job cut-back, and by July, 1971, there were five women assigned full-time to watch the 11 women who would live in the home.

It is still too early to determine results, but the program appears successful. One resident

"graduated" and was able to obtain her own apartment. One was put into the program too early and had to return to Wilton.

But the girls are holding down jobs in area laundries, hotels and private residences, are maintaining their own checking and savings accounts with the money they earn, and are doing their own cooking and shopping. One girl is even collecting unemployment compensation, the victim of another job cut-back.

A similar halfway house for men is envisioned as soon as the job freeze thaws.

"When most of these girls came here, none of them had ever had to make a decision before in their lives," says Mrs. Riley. "I guess that's something we take for granted."

Success in working with the mentally retarded is measured in different ways, but all involving decisions and the learning process. For the profoundly and the severely retarded, being able to feed oneself is a mark of achievement. For the mildly retarded, who will now be expected to fill working roles in society, success is being able to function in daily social situations, and in building up a reserve of self-confidence that often has been worn down by years of derision, self-consciousness and ignorance.

At Glens Falls, the girls learn how to go to the bank. At another school for the retarded, socializing experiences are organized, requiring residents to take two forms of public transportation, go to a restaurant, order dinner, leave a tip, and return to the school. It is not a college initiation or a scavenger hunt; it is training for the everyday experiences which normal people take for granted.

### SIDE-BY-SIDE

Several blocks from the Glens Falls Halfway House, there is a community workshop, typical of many such rehabilitation centers being used across the

country. There, retarded and physically handicapped people work side-by-side in simple, manual labor, in which they excel.

Wilton residents are also bused to area schools where they get vocational training in "special education" classes. In many areas of the country, "special education" is being replaced with another term, perhaps because, like "retarded," it came to have a stigma of its own. In many areas they are now called "exceptional" children.

Big Brother organizations and Scouting units are being formed at many schools. Planned parenthood groups are coming to the schools and teaching sex education. "Horseback riding, snowmobiling and skiing" are offered as diversions, physical therapy and means to instill confidence and a feeling of normalcy.

"The trick," says a ward counselor in a private school in Pennsylvania, "is convincing society these children can make it, that they're not people they should take their own kids away from."

The casual visitor into one of the cooperative educational classrooms shared with Wilton and area schools is often unable to distinguish between the retarded and the normal youngsters. The visitor to Glens Falls cannot, from the outside, tell which is the halfway house.

(This is the third in a series of four articles copyright, 1972, by United Feature Syndicate, Inc. TOMORROW: The world of little steps.)