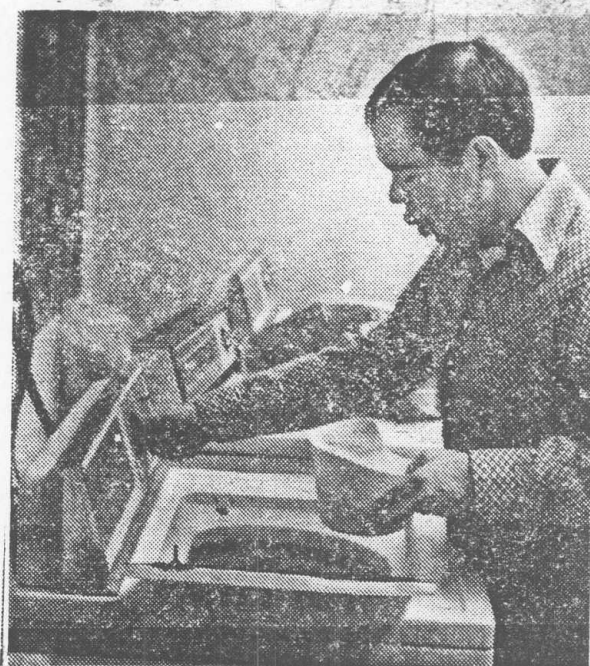


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In Williamsburg center, resident learns sewing by stitching pillow.



Another resident has already mastered use of washing machine as he prepares to add detergent.

Retarded Seek Life in Mainstream

By LAWRIE MIFFLIN

When you think of the retarded, many people automatically classify them as helpless unfortunates who must be forever shut away in large institutions from everyday life.

But a movement is gaining momentum to span the gap between average citizens and the retarded, partly by bringing many retarded citizens into communities to live in small group homes, halfway houses and even their own apartments.

This effort has alarmed some neighborhoods, however. Residents concerned about the impact on their lives of a nearby home for the retarded often have taken an active role in debating the movement.

Whatever the impact on the neighborhood, professionals generally agree that for the many retarded people who do not need large institutional care, living in a more normal environment is extremely beneficial.

Lot of Sympathy, But

Although "normalization," as the professionals call the goal, hasn't been easy to achieve, some communities have been very responsive to it, especially in Manhattan, where Greenwich Villagers have had an apparently successful relationship for more than two years with a center for 125 retarded.

Villagers even went to a public hearing in upper Manhattan to help persuade that community that there was nothing to fear from centers for the retarded. But other communities have been staunchly resistant to "normalization."

"Many people support the concept of offering the retarded a more normal lifestyle, but they say, 'Not on my street,'" complained James Forde, acting director of Willowbrook Developmental Center on Staten Island.

Independence Gained

"The concept is lovely and, of course, everyone has sympathy for the retarded," said Sarah Holzka, a Staten Island resident who is leading opposition to the establishment of a halfway house for eight to 10 mildly retarded adults on her block of Tysen St.

"But you don't take to people, plunk them down in a block of one and two-family homes where they will stick out like sore thumbs, and call that normalization. It will stigmatize them even more, and it will stigmatize the neighborhood, too."

In a halfway house or small group home, people learn to live a relatively independent life, taking care of daily chores, traveling to work or therapy sessions each day and participating in community programs through churches or other groups.

At the Williamsburg Residential and Training Center in Brooklyn, a state-run group home, about 50 retarded adults travel to work or to sheltered workshops here they learn job skills by day and return home at night.

Homes Hard to Find

As they become accomplished at their jobs and at cooking, cleaning, traveling and planning their recreational activities, they are transferred to more independent situations. Some go back to their families.

lies, some into foster families and some may even live in their own apartments.

"Three of our recent residents hold full-time, \$7,000-a-year jobs at Greenpoint Hospital," said Rasleek Kaamil, the center's director, "and two of them married each other and live on their own now."

The halfway houses proposed by the various State Department of Mental Hygiene developmental centers in the city will be much smaller than the Williamsburg group home, however. Most will be designed for between eight and 12 residents.

And although a number of halfway houses, some of them called "hostels," are being run by private voluntary groups such as Catholic Charities, the Association for the Help of Retarded Children, Contemporary Guidance and the Guild for Exceptional Children, the state has yet to get one operational.

Overwhelming Support

Proper facilities are hard to find, and the government red tape involved in purchasing and renovating homes is complex. But a major obstacle has been community reaction. Brooklyn Developmental Services, that borough's branch of the State Department of Mental Hygiene, recently purchased a house at 217 Clinton Ave. to use as a halfway house.

The Pratt Area Community Council voted to approve the project but the local planning board voiced disapproval.

On Staten Island, the Willowbrook Developmental Center went ahead and purchased a large frame home on Tysen St. to use as a halfway house — but Mrs. Holzka and many of her neighbors are trying to block the proposal's implementation.

In the Bronx, the local developmental services unit operates programs for retarded people, but as yet has no community residences although they are in planning stages, officials said.

Yet in Manhattan, two very different communities showed overwhelming support for the Manhattan Developmental Center's two most recent proposals for group homes.

One is for a residence for 140 people at 54 Haven Ave. in the Washington Heights-Inwood section. The proposal provides for plenty of community involvement with the retarded neighbors, such as shared use of the home's swimming pool and theater, joint recreational outings and the retarded citizen's participation in church, social and civic affairs whenever possible.

The other proposal was for a halfway house, in a brownstone at 141 W. Fourth St. in Greenwich Village, not far from Washington Square Park. Community Planning Board 2 in the Village voted unanimously to welcome the home into its neighborhood.

"Some people didn't want 'them' in the area," recalled Patricia Bertrand, chief of community services for Manhattan Developmental Center. "But since we already had a large facility at 75 Morton St., many Villagers had gotten to know our retarded residents because they go to workshops, schools, parks, churches and synagogues in the area. So they didn't have many of the fears and misconceptions that others might have."

Staten Island has not had the same beneficial association with institutions for the retarded.

It was the scandals at Willowbrook that helped spur the movement to decentralize and bring retarded citizens back out into their communities. This led to the establishment of Developmental centers in each of the five boroughs.

"How can we expect the state to manage these halfway houses all over the Island if they can't even manage their affairs efficiently in one place?" asked Mrs. Holzka. She stressed that her neighbors are concerned about a "saturation of this part of the Island with facilities for special-need, high-risk people" and their fear that the retarded might some day be replaced by other "wards" of the State Department of Mental Hygiene — the mentally ill, addicts and alcoholics.

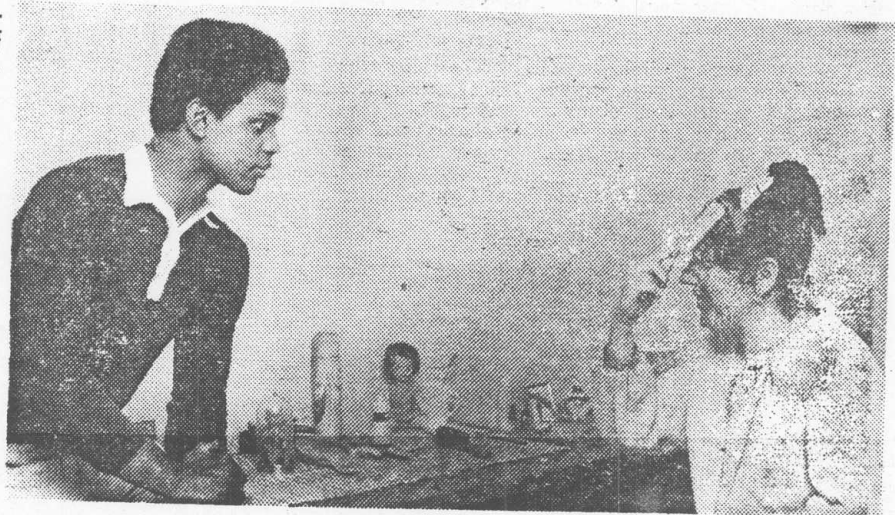
At Robidoux, chief of community services at Willowbrook, said that a recent program of teaching



Instructor Charity Carney teaches resident a marketable skill—use of the sewing machine.



At Manhattan Development Center, unit chief Joseph Moscowitz (second right) chats with resident as Pat Bertrand, director of community services (standing), shares chuckle with another resident. After day's work chat two residents (→) chat in homey atmosphere.



News photo by Vincent Riehl

42 mildly retarded residents to live in their own apartments, traveling to and from jobs or workshops each day alone, has resulted in 20 being discharged permanently from state care. The other 22 are living in apartments, but with continuing supervision.

Robidoux estimates that at least 80 Staten Islanders and between 800 and 900 residents of other boroughs now institutionalized at Willowbrook are capable of semi-independent living in a halfway house right now. But there is nowhere for them to go.

State officials said there are also hundreds of Willowbrook residents, and retarded people in other large state institutions outside the city, who are not capable of functioning in a halfway house, but could profit from being closer to their home communities nonetheless.

Kenneth LaCorte, 31, now lives with 125 other retarded people at Sheridan Unit of Manhattan Developmental Center, 75 Morton St. He used to live at Willowbrook, with close to 3,000 others.

"We can't believe the change in him," said his mother, Sue LaCorte. "We can visit him every day, and we take him home every weekend. He just loves to come home, and now he attends occupational therapy at a training center on E. Fifth St., so he sees a bit more of the world every day. I can tend to his laundry and make sure he doesn't look like he belongs in an institution. He doesn't look so fearful and shy as he did at Willowbrook."

Mrs. LaCorte added that the community around Sheridan has come to accept its retarded neighbors and sees that they are "human beings, not freaks."

"Normal children play with these children, they go to church and on picnics," she said. "This can only happen when they are in the community, instead of out in the woods somewhere."