

Willowbrook girl thrives on foster family love and care



Denise DeNaro assists her foster sister, Daphne, with her homework, while the rest of the family looks on. Left to right are Dominic DeNaro, Annette DeNaro, Denise, Daphne, and Lou DeNaro.

S.I. Advance Photo by Frank J. Johns

By SANDRA ZUMMO

"I remember when my daddy brought me there. I was crying because I wanted to go home..."

Daphne was seven years old when her father placed her in what was then the Willowbrook State School.

Though he saw her tears at being left behind, he felt he was doing the right thing. Daphne had cerebral palsy and he considered himself ill-equipped to administer to her special needs.

The good-natured child remained in the institution for nine years, through visits by state officials, promises by administrators and a name change meant to improve the image of the facility. But, "state school" or "developmental center," those 350 acres could not be considered "home," not in the sense that the word meant warmth, love and caring.

With her bright smile, Daphne made many friends—but little progress. She was shy, spoke little and her hip involvement made walking extremely difficult. The youngster was happy, but not thriving.

Then, in 1973, things began to change for Daphne. She started making weekly visits to a family in Dongan Hills, spending weekends in their home and then returning to Willowbrook on Monday mornings.

At first, she couldn't wait to go back to the institution and her many friends there. But soon she began enjoying her weekend jaunts into the community and came to consider herself a member of the family she was visiting.

When the question finally came, "Would you like to live with us?" Daphne accepted. She was finally going home.

"Daphne has been with us three-and-a-half years now and she's an absolute joy," says her foster mother, Annette DeNaro. And if the smile which fills every space of the teen-ager's well scrubbed face is any indication, that the feeling is mutual.

According to Daphne's social worker, Pearl Lenzian, the 19-year-old has made amazing progress since living with Mr. and Mrs. Louis DeNaro and their three children.

"They helped me to walk better," Daphne exclaims when asked how the family has helped her. And indeed,

Daphne walks with her hands at her sides, unlike many cerebral palsied who keep their arms outstretched in an effort to maintain balance. The young lady has also had hip surgery since entering the DeNaro household and the family has been instrumental in aiding with her therapy.

She can also walk up and down stairs — an action she was incapable of when she moved in — is more sociable and has increased her vocabulary.

If ever there was a good advertisement for the benefits of family care for those with retarded mental development, Daphne and the DeNaros are it.

But, there are approximately 200 more success stories like Daphne's in the community, and at least 60 more in the making, according to the Metropolitan Placement Unit (MPU) formed earlier this year to carry out the mandates of the consent decree signed by Governor Hugh Carey in April, 1975.

That document states that the state department of Mental Hygiene "shall develop a full program of normalization and community placement with a full complement of community services... (including) work placement, legal services, health services, recrea-

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