

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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tional services, citizen advocacy and...education."

Whereas Daphne and the others were placed by Willowbrook's Community Services Department, MPU is responsible for placement of members of the "Willowbrook class," those present in the institution when parent groups began their legal battle to improve conditions in the facility in 1972.

There are approximately 200 clients still remaining in Willowbrook who are native Islanders, according to Island MPU director Anthony Snachkus.

"Of these," he explains, "a possible 60 can go into family care, either with their natural or foster parents." Snachkus goes on to say that about 70 residents are able to live in group home settings, while another 50 or 60 will always be in need of the services of a developmental center.

"These, perhaps, will be included in the 250 who will remain here when the population has been decreased as per the decree," he concludes.

The director characterizes those ready for placement in foster homes in the "mild to moderate" range of retardation. Most of them are toilet trained and fully capable of taking care of their personal needs.

In an effort to prevent the "dumping"

which occurred when state mental hospitals sent patients into communities before investigating whether or not there were adequate facilities to meet their needs, the decree provides that Willowbrook residents cannot be placed in the community before MPU can guarantee six hours of programming daily and provision of projected medical care.

Once these conditions have been met, MPU must find the most important element — a good home.

"The type of people we are looking for, ideally, are those who have had experience being parents," says Snachkus. "But," he continues, "whether they've had experience or not, the biggest quality they most possess is the ability to give and receive affection. We need people who can be mothers and fathers without smothering the child."

In explaining the role of the foster parent in the development of the child's potential, Snachkus terms the foster parent "a part of our team." Says the director, "They are working with us to have that client reach his full potential. Parents should reinforce what is learned in sheltered workshops, in special education classes and in other training facilities."

It was constant reinforcement and support which helped Daphne reach the level of competency she has achieved, a level she might not have reached if she had remained at Willowbrook.

"The problem with large institutions is that there is no one there who can give the client the one-to-one attention that he needs if he is to develop," advises Mrs. Lenzian, who explains that despite therapy at the United Cerebral Palsy Unit, Daphne might still be having trouble keeping her arms at her sides if the DeNaros hadn't been able to remind her to do so when she wasn't at school.

Even with a ratio of one attendant to every nine residents on a ward, it is highly unlikely that anyone could take the time to do the same for Daphne, were she at Willowbrook today.

In addition to helping the former Willowbrook resident respond to physical therapy, placement in a foster home also opens up a new world for him; a world devoid of regimentation and low self-esteem.

Denise DeNaro, 17, remembers that when Daphne first came to live in her home, she had never seen a bathtub (there are no bathtubs at Willowbrook, only showers). "We taught her how to get into the bathtub, how to wash her hair and even how to coordinate her clothes," says the pretty teen-ager who shares her own clothes with her foster sister.

The influence of two teen-ager sis-

Is there room in your home and your heart for one more person? If so, you might be able to assist the Metropolitan Placement Unit in accomplishing the task set before it. There are persons of varying ages, abilities and ethnic backgrounds available for placement in the community now. For information call Andrew Cook, the community placement specialist at Willowbrook, at 698-1440.

ters and a teen-ager brother has helped Daphne to mature (though she is still not functioning on a level concurrent with her chronological age). Since coming to the DeNaro household she has been encouraged to have opinions, she has learned to have self-respect, and, perhaps most importantly, she has been treated as an individual, with individual wants and needs.

The development of this sense of individuality is very important, if those placed in foster care are to develop to the extent where they can function on their own in the community. For, according to Snachkus, foster care placement is not viewed as "a final step."

"We view it more as a part of a continuum of care and service," he declares. "Hopefully, in five or however many years, the client can move into a group home and eventually out on his own."

There will probably be a lot of sad faces in the DeNaro household if and when that day comes for Daphne, so firmly has she been accepted as a member of the DeNaro family.

In discussing her role as a foster parent, Mrs. DeNaro asserts that you can't do it for money (foster parents receive \$273 a month) or for glory.

"You do it for love," she says quietly. "Sometimes it can be frustrating when you see how slow the progress is. But then, when you see what you've accomplished, what a feeling... Look at Daphne. If you had seen her when she first came here, you wouldn't believe the difference."

It is a difference that Daphne is keenly aware of. Though she's still a bit shy and giggles when addressed, Daphne has little trouble putting into words the difference between living in Willowbrook and living in the community.

Smiling broadly, she puts the whole thing neatly into perspective. "Here I have a Mommie and a Daddy and sisters and a brother and cousins and grandmothers."

Considering all this for a moment she looks up finally and declares, "It's nice to have a family..."

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