

Group Brings Retarded

Out of Institutions

By MARY ENGELS

A major step in bringing the mentally retarded into "the mainstream of life" is being undertaken by a nonprofit voluntary organization, The Association for Children with Retarded Mental Development, in cooperation with the state.

A former director's home on the grounds of the state's Willowbrook Development Center in Staten Island has been turned over to the association for use as a home for six mental retardates from Willowbrook who are learning to live in a "normal homelike atmosphere."

It is the first of many such homes the association hopes to sponsor in all the boroughs in order to bring "the retardate back into community living and away from institutional life."

Mrs. Ida Rappaport, executive director of the association, which has been in existence 5 years, said, "It has long been our goal to bring those retarded who are in institutions out of the dorm and into the home. But in order to do that we first had to see that there were programs and services out there in the community that were made available to the retarded."

Son Is Retarded

It was the search for such services for her own son 25 years ago that led Mrs. Rappaport to seek out other parents like herself and set about doing something about the lack of programs for the retarded.

"There just wasn't anything available," she said, "so we began with a rehabilitation center in Manhattan offering programs in vocational and job training through actual work experience as well as employment and guidance counseling. We also provided and still do social and recreational programs for the retardate."

The organization started in Manhattan with 5,000 square feet of space and about 35 to 40 retardates. Today space has grown to 100,000 square feet and about 400 retardates in the day programs and more than 300 in recreation and social programs. Centers are now located in Manhattan, Brooklyn and Queens.

Community Opposition

"It was important to create the services in the community first before attempting to introduce a facility in the community where the retardate could live in normal, homelike surroundings," she said.

Overcoming community opposition to such homes, or hostels as they are called, is a problem as the state has found in attempting to open residences in various boroughs. The association also ran into difficulty when it was seeking to purchase property in Brooklyn.

Mrs. Rappaport feels this is all changing however "as more and more open up and people see our kids for what they are."

In the case of the Willowbrook property, there was no community opposition to worry about, although acquiring the house took longer than planned.

5-Year-Old Idea

"We first instituted the idea more than five years ago," explained Mickey Marlib, associate director of ACRMD. "Those beautiful white frame houses with the green shutters were sitting there occupied by the center's directors who could well afford to be living elsewhere."

"When we suggested the hostel idea to then Willowbrook director, Dr. Jack Hammond, he thought it a good one. However it wasn't until Thomas Coughlin, acting director and deputy commissioner for the state's Department of Mental Retardation, acted on it the go ahead was given."

The house, an attractive two-storied white frame building with nine rooms was given a sprucing up and new furniture, along with carpeting and drapes.

The six residents were chosen from Willowbrook and they are in the process of attending the ACRMD rehab center in Manhattan and learning the activities of daily living, such as cooking, making beds, general housework.

The day we toured the house the group had just returned by bus to their home and were in the process of getting ready for the evening meal. House parents or managers, as they are sometimes called, Pat and Dave Birchard were getting spaghetti prepared for the residents.

Two, Cathy and Patty, who originally came from the Bronx and Manhattan respectively, offered to help with the meal.

The young men, Henry, who was born in Puerto Rico, Roberto, from Manhattan; Danny, from Staten Island; and John, from Long Island, were going about their business gathering laundry, writing notes, and reading. It was just like home, even to the television in the game room.

'Appreciate Everything'

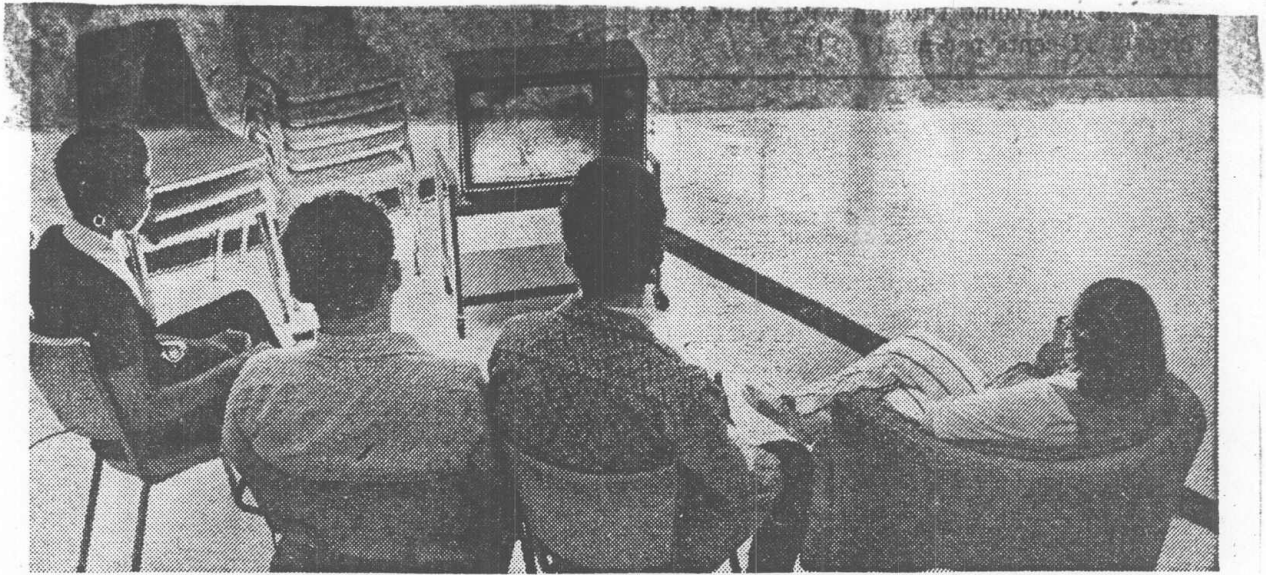
The Birchards said they loved watching over the group because, said Pat, "They appreciate everything you do for them and that in itself is a joy."

The association has already acquired property in Elmhurst, Queens, where 14 retardates will next be placed. "Our goal is to have 500 hostel placements by 1980," said Marlib.

The organization calls the house at Willowbrook "a transitional one because as more facilities open up in the boroughs these residents will be able to move into their own community."

Meanwhile, the association is planning to show off its new home on Thursday, Nov. 18, when it will have a preview for the media in the afternoon. They have invited Gov. Carey, state commissioners from the department of mental health and retardation and local legislators.

"We are hoping," said Mrs. Rappaport, "that maybe the state will see fit to let us have some more of those vacant houses that are presently lying vacant."



Hostel residents at home on Staten Island relax watching television after dinner. The residents attend a rehabilitation center during the day

"It has long been our goal to bring those retarded who are in institutions out of the dorm and into the home."

IDA RAPPAPORT



New photos by James McGrath
Cathy helps hostel manager Patricia Birchard prepare dinner.