

She helps retarded enter 'normal' society

By ROBERT J. RICCA

Angela is a 14-year-old retarded child who lives at Willowbrook Developmental Center. This is a very special day for her because she is going to meet two people who may change her life for the better.

They are interested in bringing her into their home and giving her the opportunity to grow in a normal environment. If all the conditions are right, that Angela likes them and that they, in turn, can offer to her the love and care she desperately needs, then she will have a chance at life the same as the rest of us who are blessed with being "normal."

The people at Willowbrook who are responsible for this happy occasion all work for the Metropolitan Placement Unit (MPU), an arm of the State Department of Mental Hygiene. They have been working diligently to make this day possible, and when Angela goes to stay with her new foster parents they will continue working with her by reviewing her case at least every three months.

One of the driving forces behind this placement effort is the 32-year-old deputy director of MPU, Karin Eriksen, whose whole life is wrapped up in helping those who have been born with the "curse" of retardation.

As she explains, "The retarded have rights the same as you and me, and one of those rights is the opportunity to live in a normal home environment, surrounded by people who care and understand. What the retarded person needs least is sympathy and, what's worse, to be dumped some place so that he'll be out of society's way. This is where MPU comes in.

"Our job is to provide a program of normalization, which means placing the



Karin Eriksen

retarded person in surroundings where he will have the opportunity to develop.

"We must get the community ready to accept the retarded person as part of society, and once this happens — and it is beginning now — we won't need places like Willowbrook any more."

She recalled that during her childhood in Bay Ridge neighbors who had a retarded son refused to send him to Willowbrook because they felt that allowing him to grow up around normal people was the best thing.

Both he and Miss Eriksen were playmates and "I was never really aware that he was different." Perhaps it was this singular event in her life that caused Miss Eriksen to realize that she had a service to offer people.

When she was graduated from Wagner College in 1965, she became a social worker. It was this first professional experience in the field which several years later got her in touch with Barbara Blum, MPU's director.

"I first started with Barbara as a special assistant on another project," said Miss Eriksen, "and when that was finished we lost contact for a while. But she remembered me and when she was hired as director, she asked me if I was interested in being her

deputy. I didn't have to think twice about accepting.

"I consider myself very lucky to work for something I believe in and for someone I believe in."

Since she started last March, Miss Eriksen has put in an average of 12 hours a day, four hours of which consists of evening meetings with community groups. "But still I don't have enough time to do all that must be accomplished."

Yet, with all her "lack of adequate time," Miss Eriksen adroitly supervises a staff that includes 22 professionals at Willowbrook, 20 in Brooklyn and at least 10 in each of the other boroughs.

"We're all involved in the business of people, our specialty being the retarded. For the children, we attempt to place them in foster homes where normal activities will help them attain growth; for the older retarded person, we involve him in day programs — and this also goes for the kids as well — and sometimes we are able to place him with other people his own age away from the institutional atmosphere."

Miss Eriksen shares her expertise with students intending to enter the field by teaching a class on social welfare at the College of Staten Island.

She has literally rewritten the book on teaching human services by discarding the text that had been used at the school previously and working from her own "in the field" experiences.

She must have done something right because Prentice-Hall asked her to put her knowledge between the covers of a new book that book will be published next month.

Entitled "Human Services Today," Miss Eriksen lightly refers to it as her "how to save the world" book in 10

chapters. It is aimed at college freshmen who intend to deal in human services, and discusses self-awareness, working with groups and dealing with administrations.

As far as writing is concerned, Miss Eriksen was also called upon by HEW to put together a pamphlet on child abuse.

When she was asked why she chose the field of human services, there was a long silence, not of indecision but of how to explain why anyone gets involved with people. Finally, her blue eyes twinkled and the finger that had been gently supporting her cheek slowly lowered.

"I have a knack for it," she said, "and I get something out of it: Satisfaction — the satisfaction that I'm helping people who are in desperate need of others who care. It's a good job and I love the work."

Her future is filled with the aspirations typical of a young 20th century woman, though she herself is anything but typical.

"I would like to get a doctorate in social work. But I would also like to teach more and write more."

Miss Eriksen's goal for the new year is to earn more cooperation for the MPU, "the new kid in town," which she claims is on the increase.

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The Metropolitan Placement Unit is in need of people who are willing to share their homes and their lives with a retarded child. For more information call 775-1616.