

# Foster homes needed for Willowbrook folk, once 'rejected'



Three home placement candidates enjoy each others' company while they work in Willowbrook's sheltered work-shop.

By SANDRA ZUMMO

Have you ever had one of those days when you are convinced that nobody likes you?

Even though you can't remember saying or doing anything untoward, you sense resentment and get the uncomfortable feeling that you are cut off from others.

Can you imagine having that experience for days? Weeks? Months? Years?

If you are 37 years old, developmentally disabled and have been a Willowbrook resident for a quarter of a century, such an experience can become a way of life.

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The Metropolitan Placement Unit, housed in Building 2 of the Willowbrook Developmental Center, is charged with the responsibility of placing approximately 200 clients who are native Islanders back into the Island community.

Ideally, one-third of these can go into foster care. The other 150 may be placed in group homes, health-related facilities, or highly specialized family care situations.

To date, about 10 people have been placed into foster homes, four on the strength of an appeal made in these

pages in September. Of the 10, six are under age 21 and in the mild to moderate range of retardation.

"We have a small group, say another 10 in this category, waiting for placement," comments Andrew Cook, borough coordinator of the MPU. He forsee little problem in placing the remaining youngsters.

It is another group of Willowbrook residents that Cook worries about relocating.

At least 100 of the Island residents

Is there room in your home and 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 borough coordinator, at Willowbrook, at 698-1691.

still in the facility are between the ages of 21 and 60 and were placed in Willowbrook as children.

Cook terms them the "forgotten" people, explaining that they did not have the advantage of enlightened thinking on

mental retardation when they were young.

He maintains that had these residents not been put into Willowbrook, "there's a chance that some of them might have wound up more, well, more 'normal.'"

Cook and his staff are anxious to place this older group and give them the chance they have been denied all their lives. But, the MPU is not having an easy time of it.

"Everyone wants to do for the kids," Cook says. "As a result, most of them are gone. But people are more reluctant to take the older ones. I don't understand it...they are a lovely group; mellow, and, in some ways, easier to work with than the youngsters."

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"He has a very poor self-image," the case-worker explained.

He was discussing John, a Bronx native, who was brought to the Island, and Willowbrook, soon after his 12th birthday.

"John's basic problem is that people have been putting him down all his life

not giving him a chance. He assumes people don't like him and becomes defensive so that he won't feel so hurt when they reject him."

Those who know and work with the 37-year-old at the United Cerebral Palsy Workshop in Port Richmond, describe him as "amazingly bright," citing his ability to work with tools and intricate machinery as examples of his well-developed motor skills.

But, like the caseworker, they characterize him as "withdrawn" and "suspicious," able to communicate well, but generally unwilling to establish a rapport with others.

Most concede that John's seeming anti-social behavior is a result of emotional deprivation caused by years spent in the institutional setting.

"Once assured that people like him, John can be a warm, giving, sensitive person," the caseworker reveals. "He just needs that assurance that people accept him.

"What people like John need," he sighs, "is the community experience..."

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What kind of persons make the best foster parents for this older age group?



The foster home placement plan for Willowbrook residents is discussed by, left to right, Esperanza Roberts and Gail Smith, with John L. Sullivan, a counselor.

Andy Cook is asked.

"Most people really," he answers. "Single persons, widows, widowers, couples with children — each in his own way can provide a good setting for the older retarded person."

He speaks of the obvious material qualifications that are considered before placement: the physical safety of the house, availability of an extra room etc. and then turns his attention to the personal qualifications of patience, a willingness to allow the newcomer to become a part of the family and the ability to allow him privacy.

"The caretaker should understand the retarded person's limitations, but not treat him as a child. We limit them when we treat them like kids, and some have so much more intelligence than we are aware of," Cook concludes.

Of the 100 older residents the MPU must relocate, 35 are mildly to moderately retarded, meaning they can communicate, have self-help skills, understand simple directions and will perform jobs with supervision.

Most visit sheltered workshops and some even receive pay for the work they do. All are provided with a daily six-hour program (except on weekends)

by the MPU, a job the agency maintains even after community placement.

The MPU also provides for the ex-Willowbrook resident's transportation to and from classes or workshops, gives him a clothing allowance, assumes the burden of his medical care and arranges regular visits from a social worker.

"Placement of a retarded person into a foster home doesn't cause any drastic change in the family's daily life," assures Cook, who points out that caretakers receive a monthly stipend of \$273.70 in payment of room and board. And he maintains that the relocation program begun last year with the creation of like MPU offices throughout the city, has had a high success rate, with one per cent or less of ex-residents returning.

Reflecting on the task ahead of him and the people he must place, Cook momentarily loses the composure of a borough coordinator.

"The way they were placed here was ridiculous! A child might have had an undiagnosed hearing problem, his parents were told the child was retarded and so the kid was clapped into Willowbrook."

He pauses for a moment, then continues.

"It's important that we begin to place these older people in the community...we've done them such an injustice..."

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John knew that, having lived the first 12 years of his life in the Bronx, he was supposed to be relocated into his borough of origin as per the Metropolitan Placement Unit's directive.

"But, he didn't want to go back to the Bronx," his social worker confides. "He really enjoys his job at the workshop and feels that it won't be able to function smoothly without him. So he asked us if he could remain on the Island."

Perhaps it is prophetic that his request to have a say in his future met with success. It may presage fruitful years with the family he will join when he becomes an ex-Willowbrook resident next week.

"He's ecstatic about it," declares Andrew Cook about John's reaction to community placement. "Workers who know him tell me that he's been very excited and has told them many times that he has a home."

John will be living with a young couple and their three children. He's been visiting them on weekends, to see if both he and the family wanted each other. Fortunately, they did.

If things go as Cook says they most often do, John should be making measurable progress by next year. He cites improved speaking skills, more pride in appearance and competency with money, among other things, as "remarkable changes" that begin to take place when the retarded person leaves the institution and settles in the community.

His acquaintances say that John has been a bit more out-going these days. He's anxious, too. Anxious about succeeding outside the Willowbrook grounds, anxious about pleasing his new-found friends, anxious, and "jubilant," about starting a whole new way of life.