

After months of waiting, Eddie begins his new life

By STEVE CROSS

When 19-year-old Eddie Clohessy walked through the doors of a Pennsylvania center for the mentally retarded this morning at 10 o'clock, it climaxed almost a half-year's effort that not only involved a Pennsylvania congressman but caused Eddie's family to uproot itself from Staten Island.

The story begins last September, when Edwin Clohessy quit his job at a Stapleton furniture store and, with his wife, Ruth, moved to Allentown, Pa.

"We found their system of caring for the mentally retarded far superior to New York's," he said. And it was for better care for their son, Eddie — a resident at Willowbrook Developmental Center since 1970 — that they moved.

They felt that their son just wasn't getting proper care at Willowbrook, and even expressed their concern in a letter to the Advance prior to their move. Since then, they felt the situation was worsening.

A source at Willowbrook described Eddie as "very over-active and aggressive. He was under heavy sedation at most times."

The source also said Ed was involved in several fights with others. It is those fights that made the Clohessys decide to move to another state.

When they arrived in Pennsylvania, they thought it would be only a matter of weeks to admit Eddie into Whitehaven Center, a care facility in northern Pennsylvania.

It was far from a "matter of weeks."

"First they told us it looked good," Mrs. Clohessy remembers. "But they had to trade one patient with New York in order to take Eddie."

It's not quite as simple as trading Thurmon Munson for Johnny Bench.

According to a spokesman for New York's Department of Mental Hygiene, "When parents, for example, move from New York to Massachusetts, we try to exchange their child with the new state."

But it doesn't always work out that way. In fact, one family that moved from New York to a neighboring state nine years ago still is waiting for their son to be transferred to a mental care facility in the same state.



Eddie Clohessy leaves the U.S. Public Health Service Hospital in Clifton on his way to a new home. With him are his mother, Mrs. Ruth Clohessy, and his sister, Mrs. Nancy Morotta.

S.I. Advance Photo by Robert Parsons

The Clohessys maintained close contact with the Pennsylvania state agency in charge of interstate transfers. They say they completed the necessary paperwork, but still Eddie remained at Willowbrook.

"We pleaded with them to help us, told them we did all that they asked us to do," Mrs. Clohessy remembers of the Pennsylvania agency. But still Eddie was on Staten Island while the family was in Allentown.

Even though one of two sisters still here visited occasionally, the family felt the separation to be detrimental to Eddie. He couldn't understand why his parents didn't come by the three or four times a week they used to before moving. And, the charge that since they didn't, his quality of care deteriorated.

At wit's end, and in Pennsylvania less than a year, they decided to do what one is taught to do in civic books at times like these: Write your congressman.

They dropped a line to Rep. Fred B. Rooney, Democrat from the 15th Congressional District, explaining their frustration at getting Edwin into their home state.

"He felt they were a very worthy family," an aide said, so he contacted the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare and asked if they could offer any assistance.

"It was a very sad case and he tried to do his best from Washington," the aide added.

That was Feb. 7. Within two days, the aide estimated, Rooney was notified that Whitehaven would work it out. And while the congressman's office said no trade of patients will be necessary, a spokesman for the New York Department of Mental Hygiene said a trade is being worked out.

The Clohessys credit Rooney with being the catalyst that led their son to their new home state.

"We had tried everything else. We felt we were against a brick wall, but he said he'd do everything to help us and he did," Mrs. Clohessy said of the congressman.

The timing couldn't have been better.

While the final details were being completed, Eddie was in the U.S. Public Health Service Hospital, Clifton, recuperating from wounds above his eye that reportedly he received in a fight at Willowbrook.

But when the parents of Eddie Clohessy picked him up Wednesday at the hospital, instead of returning to Willowbrook, he rode across state lines to his new home.