

# 2 Willowbrook Children

## are 'Home' Free

By GEORGE JAMES

With nothing more in life than an extra suit of underwear and some socks, two children came back from Willowbrook last week.

Adam and Karen are their names. They are the first.

They got into a small white stationwagon and rode away from the Willowbrook State School on Staten Island, where they had spent their lives since infancy as statistics. They returned to Queens where they were born.

Adam, 14, and Karen, 11, are severely retarded. Their eyes stared out the car window at Northern Blvd. in Little Neck, all new, so strange from the large, understaffed, impersonal wards that had been the confines of their lives. The car turned off on Marathon Parkway and then turned up Gaskell Road.

The change from Northern to Gaskell is abrupt, dramatic. Gaskell is a narrow road bounded by trees, bushes and flowers. It runs parallel to Northern, a wide, commercial thoroughfare. Northern Blvd. is a city; Gaskell is pastoral lane. The stationwagon stopped at 251-04, a three-story, brick house on half an acre. Their new home.

Their lazy brown eyes fixed on the people waiting to greet them: Tom and Laura DeFaio, two professional child-care workers who would be relief parents; the DeFaio's two, nonretarded children, Ginger, 4, and Daniel, 18 months. Daniel Rosen, executive director of the nonprofit Working Organization for Retarded Children; Phyllis Susser, organization president, and Vicki Schneps, its founder.

### Neighbors Were Hostile

Seeing them, Vicki Schneps could feel herself cracking. Seeking some private corner, she stepped quickly into the hubbub of the house where electricians and carpenters were putting the last of the finishing touches of \$100,000 in renovations to the house the organization had bought for \$108,000. All of it was money WORC had raised.

Vicki began to cry. Phyllis Susser saw her and broke into tears herself. It had been such a long, hard ordeal: neighborhood resistance, court battles. She wished that someday she could find for her own daughter, Lara, a setting like this. There is still no such group home for nonambulatory retarded children like Lara, who functions like a 2 month old, even though she is 9 years old.

Vicki had put her in Willowbrook and founded the organization for retarded children in 1971 to raise money for the large facility. But then the story of Willowbrook's horrible conditions broke, stories of 40 and 50 children to one attendant, children idling away, receiving little therapy or education, living in their own dirt.

The concept of how to treat the retarded was reexamined. Courts ruled that human warehouses had to go; the retarded would have to be cared for in small group homes in the communities.

Vicki put her Lara into a private care facility and set about to change WORC's concept. Instead of fund raising for Willowbrook, it would open its



News photo by James McGrath

Adam explores his new backyard.

own group home — a home for eight children staffed by house parents and child-care workers 24 hours a day.

In a small intimate environment, chances for the retarded to develop their potential would be better. Given individual attention, care and love, they could lower into self-sufficient adults, able to feed and clothe and care for themselves someday.

The problem is, most people do not want such a home on their street. Many of the people around Gaskell organized and fought the idea; first at community meetings, then in the courts, where they lost.

They said that Vicki and her people had been deceitful in the way they bought the house, arrogant and high minded in their dealings with the community.

They called WORC members "twisted, rapacious idealists."

They said there were better locations. They feared the lowering of property values. They feared an influx of such homes.

Maybe they were afraid the retarded kids would be noisy.

Maybe they were afraid they'd be violent.

PAGE 1  
OF  
2 PAGES