

# 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.

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Maybe they were afraid they'd harm their own children.

Maybe they were afraid of just seeing them.

Vicki would go home at night after being denounced and look at herself to see what kind of ogre she was. She is only a blonde-haired, blue-eyed woman from Bayside, a young mother of three children, one of whom is retarded. All of it came back to her now and she wept and thought that eventually, maybe, when they had got used to them, when they'd come to the neighborhood open house in the summer, then maybe the neighbors would see they were not monsters.

In the house now, Adam was given a soft, rubber football.

Karen got a doll. "Thank you," she said, clearly. Upstairs, Adam picked his own bed in a room with bright blue walls and ceiling wallpaper decorated with airplanes. They gave him a large Mickey Mouse doll. Karen's room had bright green walls and white ceiling, green and white furniture and green rug.

Tom DeFaio had told his daughter that they would live on weekends with these children. "These are 'our' new children. They're slow, and most of them won't know how to talk."

"Well," said 4-year-old Ginger, "I'll teach them."

Tom and his wife saw no problem with having their own children here. Tom's younger sister had been retarded and had died at 23. Her experience showed him how little there was for retarded children in this life. So he had gone into child-care work.

### **They're Not Monsters**

When Adam and Karen went to sleep, it was probably the first time in their lives they slept alone in their own rooms. Mickey Mouse sat on Adam's dresser while planes flew on his ceiling.

Karen asked to be tucked in three times she liked it so much, liked the idea of someone kissing her goodnight.

Their first full day in their new home saw them do things they had never done before:

Karen set the table.

Karen made Kool-aid.

Adam learned to dig with a hoe and plant vegetables.

They strummed a guitar and with child-care workers sang "Old MacDonald Had a Farm": "On this farm they had a..."

"Duk," Adam called.

"That's right, Adam. A duck," said Tom.

"Bir," said Adam, strumming the guitar awkwardly.

"Right. They had a bird, too."

Tom and Adam took a walk to Northern Blvd. Adam never walked on a street before. He bought candy for the first time.

A woman and her daughter stopped them. "Is this our new neighbor?" She put her arms on Adam's small shoulders. "Welcome to the neighborhood," she said. Tom fought back tears. "We're so happy to have you and hope you enjoy it here."

Adam smiled, as if he understood kindness.