

Workshop grows, so do skills of mentally retarded

By SYDNEY FREEDBERG

He was a huge, monolith of a man -- about 6 feet, 2 inches, and 220 pounds. Everything about him -- his hands, his arms, his head -- seemed larger than life. The features of his sun-faded face were thick and fleshy, as if sculpted in dough. His eyes were like stone.

The man glanced about at cars traveling down Bay St., Stapleton, nodded to waiting men and turned to help an aging woman who struggled with morning packages.

It was about 9:50 in the sunny morning, not quite time for work. The man strolled back to the three-story brick structure with barred-windows.

Greeting him was a small, pretty woman, 30ish a blue-eyed blonde with a slender figure and shy, self-conscious ways. A pair of unlikely confederates.

He scratched the side of his head. She stared a bit awkwardly, and they smiled

at once and said hello. Together, they entered the Bay St. building to a shop cluttered with metal tables, prodigious machines and other factory-like paraphenalia.

They took their seats and began work, which consists of packaging mostly, things like pens, sanitary belts, nails and string.

Alongside of the large man and the small woman, 60 others, a few of them blind, others deaf, all of them mentally retarded, were working. But in the shop, there is no such talk.

And now the number of workers and an already-flourishing "business" are about to grow with a move down the street to a larger shop -- at 215 Bay St., Tompkinsville.

Staten Island Aid for Retarded Children, a 23-year-old voluntary agency that operates the place, calls it the Staten Island Aid Rehabilitation Center, or

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otherwise, a "sheltered workshop."

But the 62 people involved now know it only as work — a chance to compete eventually in the job market like every other "certified" worker.

Their preparatory tasks, according to Bert Bedford, the center's director, vary depending on background and degree of retardation. "But a person can't be solely based on labels," he says. "These are people, working people."

Some assemble pens; others accomplish tasks requiring counting skills; still others are employed as dishwashers, cooks and freighthandlers. Three individuals work at the Clove Lake Nursing Home in what is called an "on-site training program." One person has gotten a job with the American Express Co.

All of the work is sub-contracted from various private firms, with each of the "employees" paid.

In the Workshop Journal, published monthly, the clients speak of the program: "I like keeping busy in the shop," writes one curtly. Another says, "I am new in the workshop. I count boxes and work on pens. This work makes me very happy."

Yet a third explains he thinks he is "doing very well in the workshop. I try hard to get to work on time. Sometimes I am late. I go out with my girlfriend on my days off."

The move to Tompkinsville, with nearly triple the space, will mean more work contracts but more importantly, Bedford says, the admission of an additional 80 or 90 adults, aged 17 and up.

At one time, the same prospective workers might have been shunned by a harsh society whose majority saw them as "mental defectives."

What's more, according to Bedford, the move to 215 Bay St., the site of a former furniture store, will mean the admission to the program of residents from Willowbrook Developmental Center, where vocational services of this sort have been slow to materialize.

Until this point, Staten Island Aid, one of only two private groups that operates sheltered workshops on the Island, has had the capability to accept only mild or moderately retarded persons from com-

munity homes.

"But now," says Joan Hodum, director of S.I. Aid, "we'll be able to accommodate the more severely or profoundly retarded person from an institution, giving them programs geared to their specific needs."

The cost of the enlarged shop will be \$268,000 a year, with the state Department of Mental Hygiene picking up the bill for the estimated 30 Willowbrook participants to be selected. Newly admitted clients from the community are to be paid for with a combination of state, city and private funds.

The task of choosing the participants, since thousands on Staten Island are in need of such services, will perhaps be the hardest responsibility, Bedford says. Those admitted from Willowbrook will be chosen jointly by state and private administrators and community participants by the voluntary group alone.

With the enriched 6-hour-a-day programs — which will include the addition of instruction in daily living skills, job orientation, after-hours recreation and the like — will come a commensurate increase in Staten Island Aid's staff, from eight to 13 members.

The clients will be evaluated on a weekly and monthly basis by private and Willowbrook therapists "to adjust the goals and to see which ones have been met and which ones should be revised," Bedford says.

But the true goal as Bedford and Mrs. Hodum see it is a continuum of care ending in competitive employment for the clients. "To socialize them, to give them a sense of accomplishment and worth," Bedford explains. "To teach them not to be egocentric and go beyond their own boundaries. To make them total citizens."

The Tompkinsville building, to be occupied when renovations are complete in November, is "going to make it possible," according to Bedford. It is the culmination of a 15-month effort to find enlarged quarters for the program.

But Mrs. Hodum points out, "It will take even more time and more money" to achieve the far-reaching ideal: Each retarded person viewed as an individual, each given the chance, each living in the world and no longer partially outside of it.