

Our opinion

# Someone's very sick

The Sunday night fire that gutted a Dongan Hills building intended to serve as a counseling, therapy and recreation center for mentally handicapped individuals was merely the latest in a series of suspicious blazes to hit the structure. Each and every one of incidents, however, points to a very dangerous sort of thinking on the part of those responsible.

Police have arrested two suspects in connection with the Sunday fire. Those individuals are innocent until their guilt can be proved, if indeed it can be, and authorities have made no arrests in connection with earlier blazes that have hit the building.

In other words, individuals who believe fire is a solution to what they perceive to be a problem are still on the loose, right here on Staten Island.

Those who have sought literally to destroy a facility that bothers them, and who have thus far escaped detection, are possessed of a mentality that — in other times — has been recognized as a threat to freedom and democratic government as we know it.

What we've seen here on the Island, quite frankly, is a case of out-and-out terrorism.

Those who first set fire to the Dongan Hills building back in May seemed to be laboring under the impression that the handicapped are sick people who have no place in the community but should be put away — out of sight and out of mind — at institutions such as the former Willowbrook State School.

Such ignorance by itself is excusable, for ignorance may be remedied by education. But ignorant individuals who translate their ignorance into violence against persons or property must not be excused; they must be sought out and identified so they can receive the help they clearly need.

Islanders need not be fearful of retarded individuals who have the ability to live and work on their own, and who seek to become an integral part of the community. What we must fear is the mentality that fire or force are acceptable means to any end.

Earlier this year, when state officials proposed the use of a building at 26 Dumont Ave. as a center to serve retarded Islanders, those opposed to the plan had ample opportunity to make their position known.

Community Board 2 listened to and weighed that opposition, then decided there was a genuine need

for a day center to serve mentally handicapped individuals who were making an effort to live and work in the community as an alternative to life behind institutional walls.

But some, clearly, were not satisfied with the due process of government. They took matters into their own hands, setting fire to the Dumont Avenue building first on May 1 and a second time on Sept. 24.

There is no difference, really, between those responsible for those fires and people who — in earlier times — burned individuals suspected of being witches, burned books containing ideas with which they disagreed or, using gas and fire, sought to annihilate an entire race.

History, of course, proved those others wrong, just as common sense and conscience dictate that those who first put the torch to the Dumont Avenue building are sick and are in error.

Beyond the simple destruction of a facility to meet the needs of several hundred retarded persons the incidents of arson reveal the dangerous thinking that terror will solve all problems.

It won't, and the sooner everyone realizes that, the better for our community.