

Focus on education Islander brings much experience to panel on handicapped

By LAURA E. GUARINO

Sonia Braniff's first involvement with special education was borne of selfishness, not altruism.

Her own daughter handicapped and confined to a wheelchair, Mrs. Braniff set out to learn all she could about the education of the handicapped and their rights within the public school system.

But her concern for appropriate education and the rights of handicapped youngsters did not stop with her own family, and since she took the plunge, she has become the Island's most vocal and effective parent advocate.

"My phone is always ringing," she admits. "People are always calling with problems...they don't know where to turn. I want to help them avoid the pain and the hell that I went through."

Mrs. Braniff will soon be in a position to help many more parents throughout the city through her post as a newly-appointed member of the central Board of Education's Committee on the Handicapped (COH).

As part of its reorganization of special education, the board has restructured its committee, replacing all the former members and including more parents.

There was only one parent on the previous committee. Now there are four — three more than were required under the law.

The role of the central committee is being expanded to include policy decisions as well as a liaison with district committees and monitoring programs.

One of the important roles Mrs. Braniff envisions for herself is that of a parent trainer. "There are many parents on the COHs who are not really familiar with all of the special education programs. They may know a lot about their child's program but not

much about the others."

Additionally, she plans to educate herself through her new position. "I can't foresee the committee's role being handled properly without knowing about all the programs," she said.

Noting that many districts have unique programs that may exist in only one or two schools and may vary from the norm throughout the city, Mrs. Braniff believes on-site visits will be integral to the committee's work with other districts.

Although the job is a volunteer activity, Mrs. Braniff expects it to be extremely time consuming. She has not decided whether she will be legally or physically able to keep her position as a parent representative on the Island's committee, admitting that "time could get to be a problem."

"I'm kind of torn," she said. "I know the Island, I know the kids and often am aware of mitigating circumstances and can influence a diagnosis because of that."

Since she became active in the education of handicapped children, Mrs. Braniff has been one of the parents' most articulate advocates. Noting that she became active mainly out of "enlightened self-interest," Mrs. Braniff now feels some responsibility to other parents facing the trauma of accepting and educating their handicapped children.

"I have seen and heard of so many horror stories," she explained, "that if I can help one parent avoid going through hell, then that's my goal."

Mrs. Braniff, the director of the Staten Island Regional Retardation and Disabilities Council, has been in the forefront of many battles for handicapped rights.

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