

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.

Page 1
of 2



Sonia Braniff, newly-appointed member of the Board of Education's Committee on the Handicapped, discusses the rights of handicapped children during an interview.

S.I. Advance Photo by Frank J. Johns

Through her work on the COH she is attempting to facilitate the mainstreaming of handicapped children into regular classrooms and to improve parents' awareness of both their rights and responsibilities in preparing their child's educational program.

She is currently focusing her sights on the upcoming preparations of the Individual Education Prescription (IEP). The IEP is an individualized outline of both long term and short term educational and social goals prepared for each handicapped child by the teacher, in cooperation with the parent.

But Mrs. Braniff fears that many parents are unaware of how important their input is in the development of the IEP. "This is really their chance to have a say in the child's education," she said. All too often, however, parents view the forms as merely more Board of Education red tape and give only a cursory approval to the IEP.

Since IEP's are prepared by the schools in May, Mrs. Braniff is beginning to step up her efforts to educate parents in their importance.

Throughout the Island, Mrs. Braniff has a reputation for character and integrity. It stems, in part, from an incident in 1975.

Unable to obtain a license to open the

Danube Nursing Home, Bernard Bergman offered several alternative plans to have the vacant Concord building opened. A final attempt was for the opening of the 240-bed facility as the Island View Care Center, a custodial care facility for residents of the Staten Island Developmental Center.

Mrs. Braniff, president of a group of parents of Cerebral Palsy children and a key member of the regional retardation council, was pressured and threatened to vote for the proposal by some officials from the city's United Cerebral Palsy organization. Despite concerns about personal retaliation against her daughter, Mrs. Braniff voted against the plan and, later, testified before the Moreland Act Commission about the tactics used by proponents of the plan.

Mrs. Braniff, whose commitment to the rights of the handicapped is extremely strong, is pleased with the composition of the new committee.

The three other parent members, she said, are "very, very strong advocates for children" and if the composition of the committee is any indication of its effectiveness, Mrs. Braniff sees a great deal of future success.

"The committee," she said, "will create its own direction. It can only be as strong as its members."

Page 2 of 2