

# Training Retarded Calls For Painstaking Patience

At the dining room table of a pleasant, two-story house on the grounds of the Staten Island Developmental Center, a young man of 26 was the center of attention. He had been given a suit and tie to wear for the occasion, which took place in mid-afternoon. The ceremony clearly pleased him, and six people sat regarding him with friendly interest, asking questions about his welfare and what he had learned since they saw him last.

The young man placed a large hand over the hand of Pat Bolusi, the woman who has been his teacher since June 1979, looked at her devotedly, made a sound and turned to the china cabinet behind his chair.

## Demonstrated Achievement

"You want a drink of water?" she said. "You can have a drink of water. Go ahead. Get a drink of water." Smiling, pleased to perform, he opened the cabinet door, took down a glass, closed the cabinet and went into the kitchen, where a faucet could be heard being turned on and off. He did it all as if he had not learned the whole painstaking process step by step, until all 15 or more steps were completed, the glass rinsed and in the dish rack, and the young man was back in his chair.

"Very good," someone said. The man smiled, and the review and evaluation of his progress resumed.

Profoundly retarded, with an I.Q. of about 18, he is a resident of the developmental center, which was called the Willowbrook State School when his mother committed him there at the age of 2. His records say he was too much trouble for her to keep at home.

Now he has been accepted for a place in a group home in Kingston, N.Y., about 100 miles north of New York City. It is a large house where he will be at home with 10 or so others like him in a real neighborhood of other homes. To make the difficult transition from life at the institution, which is all he has ever really known, he has been taken each weekday for two years to this house to be trained, along with others, in the workings and responsibilities of a home: about closets, cabinets, doors, locks, a kitchen, the knobs on a television, the privacy of a bathroom and maybe of a bedroom and the need to keep them clean — all the things they have never had access to, all the jobs that were done by the staff.

To prepare the retarded for the world outside, two counselors, Martin R. Roth and Gary P. Hermus, have written a 600-page outline, step by tiny step, of the thousands of incremental steps involved in learning the daily maintenance of life. From this book, they have been able to reduce the young man's level of skills to a

series of percentages and graphs.

He has mastered, for instance, the 18 steps required to apply spray deodorant under his arms. He functions at 100 percent in shoe tying, 63 percent in washing his hair and 76.2 percent in the use of an electric can opener.

"For him to learn to perform the things that he's done," says Mary Sullivan, "would be equivalent to my writing my doctoral dissertation in a second language." Miss Sullivan, a psychologist, functions as the official advocate for the young man and 302 other retarded people here who have no family contacts outside.

Nine years ago, when Willowbrook became a scandal for the abysmal quality of its care, the environment, the staff, the methodology and the expectations that have brought the young man forward did not exist there. Now, by order of the Federal District Court in 1975, they do, and the official aim is to move all who were residents of Willowbrook in 1972 out of the institution into homes and the community.

It is a slow process. But the approximately 1,800 who have been resettled in neighborhoods in New York City and beyond offer an example of the quality of life that New York can provide to the retarded citizens who have spent so many years in the barren wards of Willowbrook and other similar state institutions.

## One Successful Transition

For 45 years, since they were boys, Jacob Jacobson of Brooklyn and Anthony DiCanio of Yonkers, grew up and then grew old together in a state institution for the retarded at Wassaic. "My mother put me away," said Mr. Jacobson, a gray-haired genial man of 59. "I didn't like school."

Now the two of them live with several other slightly retarded men in a columned, two-story house in Tuckahoe on Ridge Road, a neighborhood of handsome, even baronial homes, immaculately landscaped. Each morning at 7:30 they are driven to a Yonkers workshop, where they and other retarded people do light assembly and repair work. And each evening they go home.

Home, after 45 years. "This is where I keep my clothes in here," said Mr. Jacobson, opening the closet door in his bedroom. The pants and shirts were hung neatly in a row. The room was clean and bright. There was a single bed, a television set, a stereo set, all his.

A poster of Notre Dame hung over the bed. And beside a window that looked out at trees and houses was another poster with a message in red and white: "Being retarded never stopped anyone from being a good neighbor."