

Top of the Week

Praise the Lord and keep out the opposition

By MARC DAVIS

We Staten Islanders like to think of ourselves as humane, religious people. We love puppies, little babies and grandmothers. We read the Bible regularly. We especially like the part that says, "Love thy neighbor."



Marc Davis

And we do love our neighbors. It's easy. The people we don't love never become our neighbors because we ban them from the neighborhood.

That, at least, seems to be the moral of a group home controversy now brewing in Tottenville.

Staten Island group home controversies, like the tides and seasons, are utterly predictable. The state wants them; the neighbors don't. Without knowing the specifics, you could still write the script weeks in advance.

In this case, the state wants to buy an existing duplex at the foot of Amboy Road, a block from the water, and convert it into a home for 10 mentally retarded adoles-

cents and young adults, ranging in disability from moderate to severe. Two would come from the South Shore itself, eight from the Staten Island Developmental Center in Willowbrook.

A public hearing by Community Board 3 has been set for Wednesday night and, by all accounts, it should be predictable. Board Chairman Jack Potenza expects the issue to be a "pretty hot item."

But then, Staten Islanders usually approach group homes in their neighborhoods the same way they approach strangers in their home. Best to shoot first and ask questions later.

One Tottenville resident, for example, rejected the idea before he had even heard any details.

"We don't want it," said Pat McDonnell stubbornly. "They're too liberal. Social workers are too liberal. They think people should be allowed to run around loose."

McDonnell leaned back on his car and shook his head. "We don't want anything new here. We have enough people causing trouble around here," he said.

Apparently, there are many

people in Tottenville — and all over Staten Island — who "don't want anything new here."

Horst Hasselbach, for example, lives three houses away from the proposed group home. Four months ago, he adopted a white Scotty dog that had been abandoned in the area. Compassion, however, extends only as far as puppies.

"I finally scraped a few dollars together, bought this house and live in this nice neighborhood, and all of a sudden they come along and want to put this home here," he complained.

"We moved out here because it's nice and quiet. That's the reason most people moved to this neighborhood. It's a dead end street. The only people who drive down here are lost. We don't need this (group home)," he said.

So far, Tottenville's two civic groups — the Tottenville Improvement Council and the Civic League of United Tottenville — haven't taken an official stand on the issue. But Betty Sutherland, president of the civic league, came as close as you possibly can to rejecting the group home without formally saying so.

"Down in Tottenville here, we have a very bad feeling for the term 'group home,'" said Mrs. Sutherland.

Much of the resentment in Tottenville dates back three weeks to an attempted rape against a 4-year-old girl on Aug. 25. A boy living in a group home on Arthur Kill Road, operated for foster care youths by the Catholic Home Bureau, was accused of the crime.

For some reason, though, Tot-

tenville residents can't or won't acknowledge the difference between a group home for foster care youths and a group home for mentally retarded people.

"We've had such a bad experience with the one on Arthur Kill Road that when people here hear 'group home,' they panic," Mrs. Sutherland said. "We realize the difference, but as long as the connotation is there, there is going to be a problem."

McDonnell said he thought a group home for the mentally retarded might actually be worse than one for homeless youths.

"If they cause trouble here, it'll just be easier for them to get off, right?" he said.

Not everyone, though, is opposed to the group home.

Jan Rose, president of the Tottenville Improvement Council, said she personally tends to favor it, although the council itself has no formal position. "I have seen with my own eyes," she said, "if they are properly run they can and do run favorably."

And Joseph Verderber, a neighbor two blocks from the proposed home, said: "It doesn't bother me. My feeling is everyone has to be somewhere. These people are starting life with enough of a handicap. Let's give them a break."

Still, most of the people at Wednesday night's hearing are likely to be loudly opposed.

On Sundays they will go on blissfully reading their Bibles.

But only the parts they agree with.