

Group home offers a taste of real life outside institution

By JULIE MACK

For the first time in 32 years, Michael is able to sit around a dinner table and help himself to another serving of meat loaf.

For the first time, Margaret can turn lamps off and on, controlling the lights to her own satisfaction.

For the first time, Aaron has people who have time to read to him.

These may not seem like important things to some people. But to people like Michael, Margaret and Aaron, they make all the difference in the world.

And that's why the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities was willing to spend about \$500,000 to build a home on Medina Street in Oakwood so that 10 people — including Michael, Margaret and Aaron — can move out of an

institution and into the community.

This is hardly the first group home in Staten Island, nor will it be the last. But the opening of this home last week is significant because it is especially designed for the kind of clients who many people thought could never live outside an institution.

The home is based on a prototype developed by the state for the severely handicapped, and is one of the first 10-bed group homes in the state for non-ambulatory patients.

The 10 new residents of Medina Street, who have been moving into their new home over several days, are former residents of the Staten Island Developmental Center and most recently lived at Karl Warner Center or Nina Ea-

ton Center, which are institutions operated by United Cerebral Palsy of New York State, the organization which is also operating the group home.

The clients range in age from 16 to 40, but they function around the same level. All 10 are severely or profoundly retarded and multi-handicapped. All are in wheelchairs and need help dressing. Only a few of the clients can speak, and they are difficult to understand. Several of the clients can not manipulate a knife, fork or spoon. A few are so severely handicapped that they may not even understand that they have moved from the institution to a group home.

Keith Penman, regional director of UCP, does not brush aside the challenges posed by the residents' handicaps. But he does not hesitate about bringing people

like Michael and Dorothy into the community.

"I know there are still people who question why we are bringing these clients out of the institution," he said. "But the people who question this have never been in an institution.

"Our organization runs Karl Warner Center and I think we more than anybody can understand the difference between this group home and an institution like Warner."

The differences are endless. The group home has no more than two people in a bedroom; before the move, most of these patients slept in 20-bed wards. The food in the group home is prepared the same way anyone with a family would make a meal and is served family style; the institution is known for its bland, tasteless food served on a tray. The home has private bathrooms, ~~unlike the~~ communal institutional baths.

"It's a matter of having things like their own dresser. Some have never seen a stove before and have never seen anybody cook," said Lola West of UCP. "Other people may not think that the clients realize these differences, but they do."

Ironically, the extent of the clients' handicaps has made neighbors on Medina Street more accepting of the group home. "After they saw the facility and the clients, there were no problems," said Penman. "Once they understand these are very dependent people who wouldn't be running around mugging old ladies, the anxiety level went down a lot.

"Some don't feel group homes are necessary and the institutions are just fine, but that doesn't mean that they are not accepting."

The clients themselves seem thrilled with the move.

"I think the clients are very excited," said Dorothy Alexander, on-site supervisor for the home. "You see it on their faces. One keeps saying that he doesn't want to go back."

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