

# Group homes and the Land of Make-Believe

By MARK HANLEY

Let's pretend.

Let's all pretend that ours is an unblemished world, or at least our little corner of it is.

Let's pretend Staten Island is an oasis of perfection amid a troubled city.

Let's pretend all the problems of the world belong elsewhere, and that the most we should have to contend with are watering lawns and paper-training the children's puppy.

Let's pretend that earning enough to own a home on Staten Island entitles us to be spared ever having to think about terrible things like the homeless, autistic children, or mentally handicapped people. Make believe that they belong to the ugly outside world, not to us. Let's pretend that it's something other than pure, blind, dumb luck that we don't have their handicaps, that we are able to make our way in the world without help.

After all, we earned our perfection. Let's say it: We're better, and we have a right not to have to live down the street from group homes with eight or 10 people who aren't as good as us. We don't want to have to look at them. We want them to be somewhere else — out there...not here.

When someone asks, we can assure that we're only concerned about property values, and fearful for the trouble "they" — the homeless, the handicapped — might cause, and thus soothe our consciences. We can pretend to believe that when we know that the "normal" people, like us, do a much better job of causing trouble than any autistic child or homeless wretch or retarded person could ever hope to do.

Who are the vandals? Who are the intoxicated

drivers and the red-light runners who kill people on an alarmingly regular basis? Who are the drunken brawlers? Normal people, just like us. We know all that, but let's pretend that allowing these "imperfect" people to live in our neighborhoods will bring untold problems in from the outside...not here.

Let's pretend that it's not painfully ridiculous when community leaders who fight to save every tree in their neighborhoods are outraged that the quiet fight to save human beings — to give them a full life — should be in their neighborhoods as well.

We'll make believe it isn't laughable when some of our politicians, in the same breath, lament the crying need for facilities to house the unfortunates of the world, then denounce plans to house them in our communities.

We can pretend that we have absolutely no responsibility toward the handicapped and the world-weary — even so much as allowing them to live in peace in our communities — and many of us can go to church or synagogue and pray that our own perfection lasts; that nothing like the woes that have befallen them ever come to someone we love.

And let's pretend our consciences are clean when we say, without the slightest qualm, at Community Board and other meetings of responsible citizens, that yes, the homeless, the handicapped should be taken care of, should have their group homes ... but not here.

Better yet — let's not pretend anymore.

(An editorial on the subject appears on Page E 2.)

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