

Sonia Braniff cares about handicapped

By CAROLYN RUSHEFSKY
When John and Sonia Braniff's daughter Lynne was 1½-year-old, they learned she had cerebral palsy.

"The doctor said she'd be a vegetable," recalls Mrs. Braniff. "He told us we should put her into Willowbrook and forget about her. But I knew there had to be another option."

When the Braniffs went looking for medical help, however, they found no facilities on Staten Island that provided services for disabled children.

This led Mrs. Braniff to begin the first of many projects on behalf of her child, and for disabled children of all other Island families as well.

Fighting through tangles of red-taped bureaucracy, Mrs. Braniff was instrumental in founding the Staten Island Developmental Center for the early diagnosis and evaluation of all childhood disabilities.

"We wanted to make sure other parents wouldn't go through the horrors that we had to go through," she says while relaxing in the living room of her Hillside Avenue home in Stapleton.

"It was important not to focus on a diagnosis center just for cerebral palsy or muscular dystrophy or multiple sclerosis," she notes. "How would a parent know to which center to take the child? We knew that an early diagnosis center is a vital step in beginning to help a child."

For this and similar efforts on behalf of disabled individuals over a period of 16 years, Sonia N. Braniff has been inducted into the prestigious ranks of Women of Achievement.

Her many accomplishments include: Appointment by President Ronald Reagan to the Presidential Advisory Committee on Health and Human Services; appointment by former Gov. Hugh Carey to the Board of Visitors to the Staten Island Developmental Center; creation of tours for the handicapped at the Staten Island Children's Museum; member Board of Mental

Health Society; member executive committee of Staten Island Affiliate, Greater New York Chapter March of Dimes ... The list would fill a single-spaced typewritten page.

Her years of service have taught her a great deal.

For instance, she has learned that having high expectations is the best attitude in helping the disabled. "A handicapped child who has been treated as normally as possible from day one fares better than one who has been coddled," she states. "It's a mistake for parents to feel they have to compensate for the disability."

One reason early diagnosis is important, she points out, is to allow immediate hook up into a support system that helps educate them on how to encourage their child to be as self-reliant as possible. "We found out the child does better and so does the family."

"Our standards should be very high," Mrs. Braniff advises, "because starting at the bottom may discourage accomplishment; standards can always be lowered."

Mrs. Braniff was active in reforming the education system so that it now includes programs for mentally and physically handicapped children.

"I am a strong believer in the idea that everyone is entitled to a public education for whatever they're capable of doing," she says. And even though they might not achieve optimum academic levels, we shouldn't close doors on them."

That philosophy is what led to the mainstreaming of the Braniffs' daughter, Lynne, now attending Susan Wagner High School, and for hundreds of other children as well.

Another important project for Mrs. Braniff has been the sensitization of everyone dealing with the handicapped.

"Ever since my first voluntary efforts, I tried to get normal kids to take the role of the disabled," she says, recalling, "I made one child sit in a wheel-

chair and try to wheel himself to the bathroom. I blindfolded others so they could understand the difficulties of their blind school mates. And I stood before one school assembly session just mouthing words so the students could realize what a deaf child goes through."

The Braniffs, married for 22 years, are extremely proud of Lynne's accomplishments, and are equally proud of the academic talents displayed by their 13-year-old daughter, Naomi. The Bronx-born Mrs. Braniff and her husband, a native Islander, met for the first time at an office party. "I had gone back to the company where I used to work, just before I was to enter the Foreign Service," she relates. But she quit that post when Braniff, now a principal consultant for the Aegis Reinsurance Company in Jersey City, proposed.

Mrs. Braniff's voluntary service did not end with her paid position as coordinator for the Board of Education's Project ROPO (Reach Out to Parents Office), at 110 Livingston St., Brooklyn. "Fortunately my schedule is flexible, and I'm able to continue my volunteer activities," she says. For relaxation, she plays the piano ("classical and soft pop"). She also enjoys collecting antiques.

Mrs. Braniff says she hopes to continue her college education, possibly at Hunter College, which she attended before her marriage, earning 30 credits in science.

She admits to having moments of depression during her years of crusading for the rights of the handicapped. But in the middle of a dark mood she'll remember the boy in braces who was at first denied a mainstream education, and who is now doing well at Monsignor Farrell High School.

And there's the cerebral palsied girl in a special education class at Susan Wagner High School who said, "I want to do what you did with your life. I want to help people."