

'Special' couple has faith and love, needs apartment

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This is a story about the difficulties in finding an affordable apartment that allows tenants to keep dogs.

But it is also a story about faith and love, and of building a "normal" life despite the tremendous odds against it.

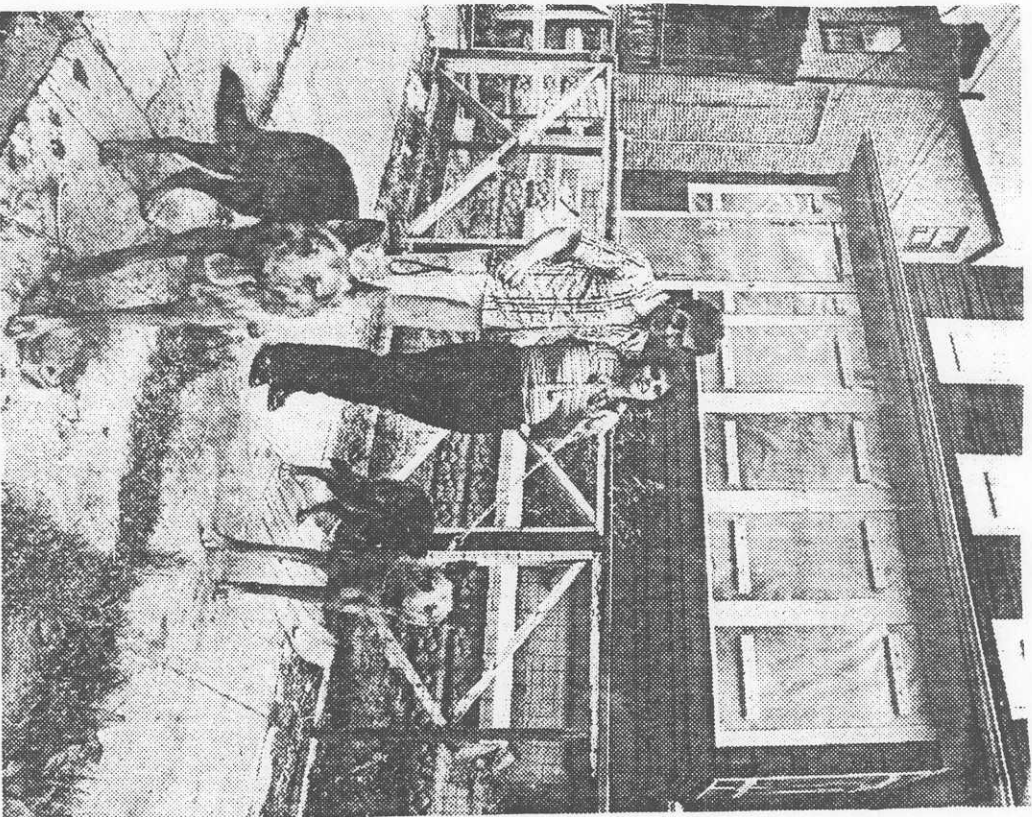
Mannel and Annette Diaz have lived for nine years as an ordinary Staten Island couple. And that, in itself, is extraordinary.

They met in the 1960s, when they were both residents of the former Willowbrook State School. Manny, 38, was a native of Puerto Rico who came to

New York as a child. His father had died. His mother was sick. An aunt in Manhattan couldn't care for Manny and his brother, and they were sent to the Mission of the Immaculate Virgin, Mount Loretto. After five years there, Manny was diagnosed as borderline retarded and sent to the state institution.

Because his retardation is minimal — Manny simply calls himself "a slow learner" — he was released from Willowbrook when he was 20. Uneducated and unskilled, he nonetheless obtained steady work.

Little is known about (See COUPLE, Page A 9)



Mannel and Annette Diaz walk their dogs in front of their former New Brighton house. They were evicted when they could not keep up mortgage payments and other bills; now they can't find an apartment that will let them keep the dogs.

S.I. Advance Photo by Tony Dugai

Annette's background. Diagnosed as moderately retarded, she is withdrawn and talks very little. Ask her questions about the past, and she just shakes her head. It is known that she spent much of her early life in Willowbrook, and she left the institution around 1970 for a foster home.

Although she knew Manny at Willowbrook, they didn't begin to date until 1974, when they both had jobs there. Two years later, they married. In 1979, they bought a two-story house on Lyons Street in New Brighton and settled down.

Everything was fine. Manny was hired by Snug Harbor Cultural Center as a maintenance worker. Annette found a position at a sheltered workshop operated by Staten Island Aid. For the most part, the couple lived an independent life and served as a heartwarming example of the "normalization" that can be achieved by the mentally retarded.

But then problems developed. While Manny had budgeted for the mortgage on his home, the high cost of utilities and maintenance was unexpected. Heating costs, especially, were a prob-

lem — the house was old, drafty and lacked insulation. At times, the monthly oil bill exceeded the mortgage. Manny fell behind on his bills.

What happened next was predictable. The mortgage company foreclosed on the house. Manny and Annette were evicted. That was two weeks ago.

Now they are living with Annette's former foster mother, and are looking for an apartment, with the help of Staten Island Aid. But it isn't easy. The couple can only afford to pay up to \$400 a month, including utilities.

And there is also the matter of the dogs. There are two German shepherds, Butch and Diamond, given to the couple three years ago. While adorable, the dogs make landlords reluctant to rent to the Diazes.

The simplest solution is to get rid of the dogs. Manny is willing to do just that. But Annette is heartbroken over the idea. "I love them," she says. "I've raised them since they were pups." Indeed, Annette — who is quiet on almost any other subject — turns almost into a chatterbox when talking about her pets. In an interview, she would

not speak until the subject of the dogs arose.

"So that's where we are now," says Joan Hodum, director of Staten Island Aid. The Diazes need housing — and they need it by the end of the month, or the furniture that the mortgage company has removed from the house and put into storage will be auctioned. They need something affordable. They need something that will allow them to keep their dogs.

The situation is particularly troubling to Mrs. Hodum, because up to now the Diazes have been a success story. But their current problems illustrate how handicapped couples who have entered the community can fall between the cracks. If the couple had had some supervision, some guidance, perhaps this wouldn't have happened, Mrs. Hodum says. She adds that her agency hopes to provide the couple with that kind of guidance in the future.

"All they need is a little help — a little help to help themselves," she says. "Manny and Annette are not asking for hand-outs. They are an established couple on their own. We're just looking for a way for them to continue their former lifestyle."