

Our opinion/

Bigotry by the book

The rallying cry of "Group home!" has been raised once again on Staten Island, and it is as ugly and mean-spirited as ever.

This time, the cry goes up from the Fountains, the co-op apartment building at 1000 Clove Road, West Brighton. It comes from co-op residents who want to evict United Cerebral Palsy and its mentally retarded clients from the exclusive building.

Though they offer various technical excuses, the residents' real motive is crystal clear: They do not want to share their apartment building with retarded or handicapped people, and they will do anything, including going to court, to prevent it.

Hard as they try, the tenants cannot hide their feelings on the matter. It is not a matter of law; it is a matter of gut emotion — an extremely ugly gut emotion.

The lawyer for the building's co-op board summed it up this way: "In reality, this (the UCP apartments) is a community residence, a group home, and it's something I don't believe any co-op is compelled to have in its building."

Ah, there's the catch. The dispute has little to do with leases or legalities. It has everything to do with uptight tenants who believe that retarded people have no right to live in an apartment building with so called "normal" people.

Oh, there *are* technicalities. The tenants complain that the UCP lease was never formally approved by the co-op board. They also complain that a building rule forbids two or more unrelated people from sharing an apartment.

It is clearly a case of selective enforcement. Many tenants at the Fountains have leases that were not approved by the co-op board. Many other tenants live and work together in apartments there, even though they are not related. The retarded, at least, have on their side state law, which

defines a group of retarded individuals living together in a group home as a family unit.

So what's the complaint? Why are UCP and its retarded clients harassed, while other tenants with technically illegal leases are not? The reason is obvious.

Residents of the Fountains do not want retarded people in their building. They have said as much at previous meetings on the subject, and their recent pronouncements of brotherly love do not in any way disguise their abhorrent motives.

"We have no problems with disabled occupants," the tenants' lawyer says. But his words are belied by the co-op's actions. Why, for example, was it necessary for the co-op board to change the locks on a UCP apartment after recent renovation work, literally locking the retarded out of their home? That's about as nasty an action as we have heard of in a long time, and no amount of rhetoric can justify it.

Not all bigotry is racially motivated. Sometimes it is religiously motivated. Sometimes it is ethnically motivated. And, yes, there is bigotry against handicapped and retarded persons, too. They are all equally insidious, all equally worthy of denunciation.

It's a pity so many people on our Island have so little tolerance for each other. It's a pity so many small, selfish individuals feel they must hire lawyers to defend their little turfs against people they don't understand. It's a pity, but it's not unusual. It happens all the time, in case after case, in group home after group home. The story is always the same; only the location changes.

"Not in my backyard." "Not in my neighborhood." "Not here." "Anywhere else."

What a pathetic train of thought.