

# 'I'm a person, I'm a human being'

■ A South Beach woman with a developmental disability proves she can handle the world — and a whole lot more

By LAURA BRUNO  
ADVANCE STAFF WRITER

At 50, Alice Catalano can slip into a school-girl giggle that is utterly contagious. She loves chatting about work, her sons and fixing up her new home. She'll wrap her arm around a new friend and smile like they've known each other for decades.

This is not the demeanor that most people see, however.

Alice has a developmental disability. It has taught her that strangers will judge her, often treat her as something less than human. So when Alice walks her dog Max along the South Beach boardwalk or her neighborhood streets, her face may be set in a frown.

"I learned not to trust people," she said.

Nowhere was the lesson drilled more effectively than at the Willowbrook State School, where at the age of 12, Alice joined thousands of children with mental retardation and other disabilities packed into institutional dormitories.

"I saw kids being hit with chairs and left in their own feces. I used to talk to the kids that were very low functioning and tell them they didn't deserve to be treated like that," Alice said.

Before being sent to Willowbrook, Alice had known a more caring environment for four years at an upstate residence run by Catholic nuns, she said. Alice had been placed in foster care because her step-father was abusive, and her mother wouldn't leave him or throw him out.

Alice didn't want to leave the Catholic home, but because her disability limited her to sixth-grade school work, "They had to send me to Willowbrook," she said.

"I changed my attitude at Willowbrook," she said. "People called you 'retarded.' They were mean to you. But I always let people know I'm a person and I don't belong tied up and cooped up."

Alice said she always stood up for herself with any threatening staff members. Sometimes she'd have encounters while mopping floors as part of her housekeeping job. "I'd tell them, 'You're not going to hit me. You hit me and I'll pick up the bucket and throw it at you.' They'd say, 'We can treat you the way we want to.' I told them I'd go to the office and I did."

In the supervisory office, "They called me a big mouth and a rat and tattletale," she said. So Alice made good on her threat and hurled her bucket at a

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worker who shoved her around.

Alice was a Willowbrook resident when Sen. Robert F. Kennedy conducted a surprise inspection in 1965 and described the institution as bordering on a "snake pit."

She remembers TV reporter Geraldo Rivera's 1971 visit that brought the horrors of Willowbrook to the nation, and she joined picket lines demanding better conditions.

This year marks the 25th anniversary of the class action lawsuit brought on behalf of Willowbrook residents against New York State. The resulting Willowbrook Consent Decree laid the groundwork for reform in the care, education and housing of people with developmental disabilities. Willowbrook State School, which became the Staten Island Developmental Center, closed in 1987.

Today, the state retains less than half of the campus to provide vastly improved services for people with developmental disabilities. The remaining 200 acres is home to the College of Staten Island, where a recent informal survey indicated that only three out of 18 students know they walk on notorious ground.

Alice Catalano will never forget a step she took on the campus.

Until she turned 21 and was freed from the foster care system, she ran away from Willowbrook a few times, as well as from foster homes where she was placed intermittently.

"I just wanted to go back home to my mother," she said. "I wanted to have a chance to be out in the world."

When she was 19 and living at Willowbrook, Alice became pregnant by her boy friend, who also resided at the institution. She gave birth in St. Vincent's



Alice Catalano stands in the kitchen of her South Beach home, purchased through a new low-interest mortgage program for people with disabilities.

ADVANCE PHOTO ■ ROB SOLLETT

Medical Center, where her son immediately was placed in foster care.

Alice went to court to prove that she could raise her son, and three years later she was awarded custody. Today, he is 24 and lives with his mother in her South Beach home purchased through a new low-interest mortgage program for people with disabilities. Alice also has 20-year-old son who lives in a nearby group home. Both young men have developmental disabilities.

Alice works part time and receives federal Supplemental Security Income for people with disabilities.

She has proven to be an excellent advocate for herself and her sons, said Donna Long, director of community relations and development of On Your Mark, a West Brighton-based not-for-profit agency that helped Alice buy her home.

"She'd go through storms and rain to get her kids to the program," said Gene Spatz, executive director.

Alice was aware of her survival instinct from the time she was a child, she said. She used to go directly to police to report that her step-father was hitting and sexually abusing her. He was arrested a few times and released, before child-welfare authorities removed Alice and her siblings from the home, she said.

"I always had an instinct as a little girl — I could sense when somebody is trying to push me around," Alice said.

Getting pushed around was routine at Willowbrook State School, Alice said, but she never stopped fighting back.

"I told them: 'I'm not stupid! I'm a person, I'm a human being.'"

# Living a dream

■ Program provides mortgages for people with disabilities

**T**hey're home. Two Staten Island families who never dreamt they could buy their own homes are ready to throw housewarming parties, thanks to a new low-interest mortgage program for people with disabilities.

"I have a little disability, but I'm not really stupid... I could run a household," said 50-year-old Alice Catalano, who recently moved into a modest two-bedroom home in South Beach. She raised two sons as a single mother, moving around to various apartments in neighborhoods where drug traffic and other criminal activities were always around the corner.

"This is my last place," she said, sitting on her living-room couch. "I'm not moving no more. This is it. I really like this place. I like having my own home."

"It's nice, it's real nice," said Veronica Davis, 30, who recently closed on a West Brighton condominium with her husband Quentin, 31. They had been renting the apartment for three years and are thrilled to now be paying a mortgage on it.

"I just want the best for my kids," Davis said. His boys, 7-year-old Michael and 4-year-old Kenny, love playing in nearby Clove Lakes Park after school.

"This area's nice," their father said. "It's good for my kids. Now I have something to leave my sons."

Ms. Catalano and Veronica and Quentin Davis all have developmental disabilities, which previously could have precluded them from even being considered for a mortgage.

Now they are among the first home buyers selected for the pilot New York State Home of Your Own Program. Through State of New York Mortgage



**LAURA BRUNO**

## ABOUT STATEN ISLAND

Agency (SONYMA) financing, qualified first-time home buyers can receive a 30-year mortgage with no down payment and only 4 percent interest. They must be referred by the state Office

The Davis family pauses in their West Brighton condominium. From the left are Quentin, Veronica, 4-year-old Kenny and 7-year-old Michael.

ADVANCE PHOTO  
■ JAN SOMMA

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# Mortgages

of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities (OMRDD) and participate in home-ownership training sessions, given here by Neighborhood Housing Services of Staten Island.

"It's giving control back to people with disabilities," said Marcie Goldstein, project coordinator for the National Home of Your Own Alliance, a technical assistance center at the University of New Hampshire's Institute on Disability in Durham.

"When Gene first told me about it, I was scared at first," Ms. Catalano said. She was referring to Gene Spatz, executive director of West Brighton-based On Your Mark, a not-for-profit organization that provides a range of recreational, residential and support services for people with disabilities.

"I had to go to school and learn about how a mortgage is like paying rent to the bank and about taking care of my house," Ms. Catalano said. "Gene helps me get the plumber or the electrician if I need anything like that."

Working through David Louis of OMRDD, coordinator of the state program, "We're there every step of the way to support them and give them the information so they can make an informed decision," Spatz said.

"We've developed a program to make sure all the

supports are in place," said Ms. Goldstein of the national alliance. "There's a plan in place for repairs, ... who would cut the grass, where would the money come from if the roof leaks or your hot-water heater goes. We really do plan, and we look at all contingencies."

Established four years ago with funding from the federal Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), the national alliance center grew out of a three-year demonstration program in New Hampshire that helped 20 people with developmental disabilities buy homes. So far, 23 states are participating. Since the 1990 start of the New Hampshire program, there have been no defaults, Ms. Goldstein said.

Though the alliance is heading into the final round of HHS's five-year start-up grant, Ms. Goldstein expects the program to continue.

There have been 13 home purchases in New York since the state signed on last year, with a target total of 36 by the end of the two-year pilot program. SONYMA has backed the M&T Mortgage Corporation to loan \$2 million for the project, with the average loan around \$50,000, more in the city.

"I think the biggest success would be in how we changed the way the financial industry looks at individuals with disabilities who receive benefits,"

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Ms. Goldstein said. The alliance educated bankers and lenders "to understand that if a person receives SSI or SSDI [federal disability benefits], it's just like you and I receiving a paycheck. It's income."

Both Ms. Catalano and Quentin Davis work part-time and receive SSI, Supplemental Security Income.

Because SSI recipients cannot have more than \$2,000 in the bank, On Your Mark helped their clients cover closing costs through donations to the agency, Spatz said. The organization may have to seek donations to help process another Island family or two currently applying for the Home of Your Own Program, but Ms. Goldstein indicated there should be existing federal dollars available to cover such expenses.

On Your Mark is willing to invest staff time, and if necessary extra money in the program because it is so worthwhile, Spatz said.

"For people to have their own home is great. So many people [with disabilities] are still in this cycle of renting and moving place to place because of rent increases or because the landlords don't fix the place up," he said.

With the Home of Your Own Program, Spatz said, "They have security and stability. It's their home, and they take pride in that."