



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.'"