

# Celebrating accomplishments

## Staten Island Retardation and Disabilities Council recognizes achievements of developmentally disabled

by EILEEN AJ CONNELLY  
ADVANCE STAFF WRITER

They work, they travel, they get married, they get apartments. They even fight for their rights. In fact, a dozen men and women with developmental disabilities who spoke at the Staten Island Retardation and Disabilities Council meeting yesterday said they basically can do whatever they want. They just need a little more time and support than other people.

The speakers took part in the council's first "Celebration of achievements" for people with developmental disabilities, held in the organization's Willowbrook headquarters.

Catherine McCarty told about 50 listeners of her experience with a bus driver who became angry with her for using the wrong half-price card to ride the bus. Talking about the experience at

work led to a complaint to the bus driver's supervisor, and eventually to Miss McCarty getting involved with a group of "self-advocates," or people with disabilities who try to work out issues on their own. The self-advocates eventually went to Manhattan to discuss how they are treated on public transportation with upper-level management of New York City Transit.

After nearly being sent to Brooklyn because of a mix-up with Access-a-Ride on the way home, Ms. McCarty said she learned another lesson.

"If I did not speak up for myself and say that I lived in Staten Island, I may have ended up in Brooklyn," she said. "Whenever there is a problem, it is good to speak up for yourself because that is the only way you will get help.

The audience sat silent, even leaning forward with anticipation, as Eric Coull used a computerized voice simulator to list his accomplishments. As he entered each letter on the keyboard, the voice would say the letter, and then Coull would press a button and the entire sentence would be said.

"I don't live with Mom," was part of his speech. "I live in a

group home."

Each sentence produced applause and cheers, but his last, "I have a girl friend" drew the some of the most enthusiastic replies.

Mary DiPierro has moved from foster care to sharing an apartment with three other women.

"It's good," she said. "It's a little tough for me, but I'm doing it."

"What I like best about being on my own is the freedom," she said. "I can go wherever I want."

Burton Petrone has indeed gone wherever he wants. Although he told the group his greatest achievement was "marrying my beautiful wife in 1986," he also cataloged a list of trips they have taken: A cruise to Mexico, visits to Disney World and Colonial Williamsburg, a trip to Canada, "and in 1988 was the best of all," he said. "Hawaii!"

Petrone explained to the group that he has retired and now spends his days at the West Brighton Senior Center, where he enjoys arts and crafts and visiting with his friends. At the center, he has also met several elected officials, including Assemblywoman Elizabeth Connelly (D-North Shore) and Republican Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani.

Jeffrey Mamet, 28, is now the president of the Staten Island UCP Vocational Self Advocacy Group, and listed his political activities for the past year, including writing to Gov. George E. Pataki, meeting with Mrs. Connelly to work on issues involving the Metropolitan Transportation Authority and meeting with the bus union leadership to discuss travel for people with disabilities.

Mary Sullivan, 33, discussed her work at Noodle Kidoodle, New Dorp, where she works on the toy store floor helping customers and caring for stock.

She likes her work so much, Miss Sullivan said, that she would like to get another job so she can work more than just part time.

Jeanine Long catalogued a list of recent achievements that included graduating from Curtis High School, starting a training program she hopes will lead to a job, winning a gold medal in figure skating at the 1993 International Special Olympics in Austria and lobbying the mayor against cuts to recreation programs.

ure skating at the 1993 International Special Olympics in Austria and lobbying the mayor against cuts to recreation programs.

"I am not here today to brag about my achievements," Miss Long said. "But to let you know how important it is to keep trying. Whatever you can do is your best, and that is what is important. Believe in yourself and don't let anyone ever tell you that you can't do something."

Daniel Himmer said he agreed. "Once you get up, don't get knocked down," he said. "And if you do, get right back up again."

After the scheduled speakers, several audience members came forward to discuss their own accomplishments. Among them were Louise Guidice, Harvey Pacht, Frank Inzauto and Victor Pagan.

*Handwritten note:*  
faxed & mailed  
12/13/97  
to Debbie R.S.