

Misconceptions about group homes and the developmentally disabled

By KAREN PRINCIPATO

I don't always get a chance to sit down and read my paper, but lately when I do, I find myself reading articles about communities rejecting the idea of group homes for the developmentally disabled.

I would like to clear up some misconceptions that the communities have. I would hope that you could print this because I feel it may bring some community awareness to those who do not understand the need for these homes.

The first point I would like to make is that the disabled are not criminals, sex offenders or drug addicts. They are human beings who were born with a handicap, whether it be autism, Down syndrome, learning disabled, hyperactivity, mental retardation, just to name a few. They have spent their lives fighting against the system. Some may not be able to receive all the services they need to grow because of the lack of funding or just because of the lack of the service. Either way, it's a struggle not only for them, but also for their entire families, parents as well as siblings.

When a child is diagnosed with one or, sometimes, multiple handicaps, the parents have to search out the best for them. In most cases, if the handicap is picked up in the early years, then there are early childhood programs for the parent to turn to. In any case, it is a sometimes devastating reality for the parents to accept that there is something "wrong" with their child. As the needs of the child change with their age, parents still have more searching to do. And let's face it: There are not many manufacturers that come with any child, never mind handicapped ones.

As time passes, the parent realizes that the child is no longer a child. He or she has

now become a child trapped in a grown-up body. And the child (adult) knows something is different about him or her.

Quite often in their lives, they have been ridiculed, laughed at, been through testing, picking and probing. And their best is never good enough for the outside world. Their peers do not accept them; society does not accept them and they are left with only their families to guide and protect them. Some of the lucky ones have much support; some do not get enough. Either way, this is another struggle — which brings me to my second point.

The group homes that are proposed for them are their lifelines. They provide constant structure and protection around the clock. The staff in the group homes have been through much training. The homes are put together to fit the needs the clients have. And most homes are created for the same level of functioning for all that will occupy them.

They are never left alone. They do not roam the neighborhoods. A staff member drives them to all their activities, which can vary among the individuals. Some of them may go to a job and some may go to a program. It depends on their needs. When they get home at the end of the day, they learn how to cook, clean, wash their own clothes, take care of the house inside and out. It's called learning basic living skills — things we take for granted every day. It teaches them how to be independent of mom and dad and it gives them much pride in doing all of the tasks.

I find it so primitive for a group home like this to be required to receive a community "permission" to open. I know it is the law at the present time, but it's appalling. And isn't it a violation of their civil rights as Americans?

These group homes, as I said before, are

not for the hardened criminals. They are for those less fortunate than others. They are the most harmless and vulnerable of all. They would not hurt anyone. None of us knows what goes on inside our neighbors' homes. One of them could be abusive in many ways. It could be drugs; it could be alcohol, or it could be a sex offender, for all we know. I know if I had adopted six children with Down syndrome, or gave birth to three autistic children, I would not have to get "permission" to buy a home. I don't know if the neighbors would talk to me, but that's not enough to stop me.

I read the article in the March 24 paper regarding the Eltingville home. I think one person said, "What would happen if they needed an ambulance? How would it find them on the tiny block?"

Well, I have a question: How would it find the person who asked that question, either?

I don't get it. People sometimes are just so ignorant. Group homes do not bring down property values. They can enhance them. I live in Great Kills. It's a pretty crowded neighborhood. When the weather gets nice on the weekends, I have about 20 to 30 teen-agers screaming outside my window. I sometimes have to put on the air-conditioner just so I can fall asleep.

I hope I have cleared up some of the misunderstandings that communities have. I know a lot about the developmentally disabled. You see, I am the proud mother of a 19-year-old son, Nicholas. He has, through his disability, taught me the true meaning of life. We were not put here on this earth to fight. We will never obtain peace until we can learn to live together. And we cannot learn to live together until people stop looking for the negative in others and start seeing the positive that lies in front of them.

The writer is a Great Kills resident.