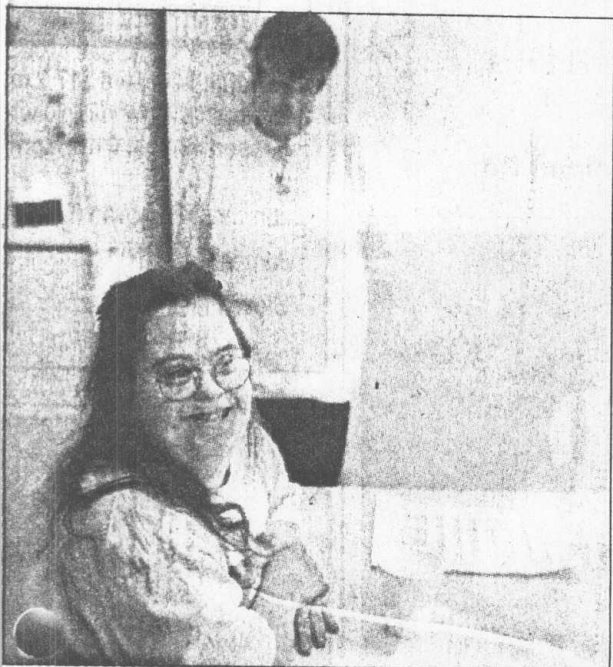




Stacy cradles Oreo, one of two house cats who share her West Brighton residence.



ADVANCE PHOTOS ■ ROB SOLLETT

In the kitchen of her West Brighton residence, Lynn smiles as resident manager Kathy Denmark stands in the background.



Toni, a resident of A Very Special Place, Dongan Hills, strikes a pose in the back yard.

**FIRST IN A FOUR-PART SERIES**

- TODAY A vulnerable population
- MONDAY Questions about staffing
- TUESDAY Heart-wrenching decisions
- WEDNESDAY Do they fit in?

The developmentally disabled have the same rights as the rest of us, but they are often treated like they don't.

By MICHAEL PAQUETTE  
ADVANCE STAFF WRITER

It's 5 o'clock on a typical weekday afternoon.

Toni shoots a few backyard hoops in Dongan Hills with a couple of her housemates before sitting down to a hot dinner of beef stew and mashed yams.

In West Brighton, Mark, who just got home from his job as a church custodian, checks on the lemon basil chicken simmering in the oven as Stacy, one of his housemates, fills a pot to boil rice.

Down in Rossville, Ray begs off table-setting duty with an abbreviated excuse — "Too tired," he says, wagging an index finger — but three of his housemates eagerly take up the slack.

Welcome to the world of the developmentally disabled 25 years after the signing of the Willowbrook Consent Decree, the landmark legislation that laid the groundwork for national reforms in the care, education and housing of people with mental retardation and other developmental disabilities.

Gone are the shocking images of institutionalized men and women lying naked on the floor in their own filth and feces. Vanished are the bone-thin specters slumped on bare wooden benches, picking at raw body parts for stimulation; or hugging themselves for comfort; or incessantly rocking to bring rhythm to a colorless day.

Today, the vast majority of the developmentally disabled live like Toni, Mark, Stacy and Ray — in groups of two to 14, most under the guidance of direct support staff, in cheery, spic-and-span apartments and houses in regular neighborhoods.

The more severely disabled keep busy by day with organized educational and recreational programs.