

Their free time is spent listening to music, playing card games, watching videos or quietly sitting in the late-afternoon sunshine.

Many of the mildly and moderately disabled have full- or part-time jobs: They are office and grocery clerks, kitchen aides and fast-food workers. Others attend vocational and training workshops. At home, they are all self-empowered: planning their menus, cooking their meals, doing household chores, running personal errands, going out for pizza, and even dating.

"The goal is independence," says Kathy Denmark, manager of a West Brighton house for 10 mildly and moderately mentally retarded adults. "We try to get the residents to make as many decisions as possible, to include them in the decision-making process."

To be sure, snake pits across the nation faded into history soon after the horrors of the Willowbrook State School (now the site of the College of Staten Island) were thrust into the national spotlight in 1972 and lawmakers quickly set in motion the legal framework to depopulate state-run institutions: a vulnerable group long shunned by Americans obsessed with vigor and perfection.

The jargon has evolved, too. Human service workers now talk of "consumers" who live in "community residences" — another testament to the determination to erase institutionalization's ugly past.

Thirty years ago, some 27,000 developmentally disabled New Yorkers were warehoused in places like Willowbrook. Now, just about 1,000 remain in developmental centers, according to the state Office on Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities (OMRDD).

But the push is on to move them — as well as thousands of others now living with aging parents — into the wider community.

"They have the same rights that all of us do," says Maureen Brennick, associate director of A Very Special Place, Inc., a private, not-for-profit human services agency based in Dongan Hills. "We are all protected by the Constitution."

In the next four years, about 40 community residences for some 200 developmentally disabled Staten Islanders will join the 127 residences now scattered across the borough, local human services providers say.

The expected increase is due to a new state initiative — called New York State Creating Alternatives in Residential Environments and Services (NYS-CARES) — unveiled by Gov. George Pataki 18 months ago to phase in enough communal living space for thousands of New Yorkers who have been languishing on a massive waiting list.

“
We want to be
like everybody
else. We want to
be liked.”

”
— Andrew, 23

Not always welcome

Yet despite laws such as the Willowbrook Consent Decree, the Americans With Disabilities Act, and NYS-CARES, some Islanders — to the consternation of the human services community — still fiercely oppose the establishment of community residences in their neighborhoods.

"Why isn't it the same for them?" Ms. Brennick asks rhetorically. "If I want to buy a house or live with a group of friends, the neighbors don't get a chance to vote on me."

Indeed, in the latest local brouhaha, Community Board 3 soundly rejected last month a proposed community residence for six mildly to moderately retarded adults in a quiet cul-de-sac in Greenridge.

William D'Ambrosio, the chairman of the Human Resources Committee that recommended the board oppose the plan, had argued the presence of the residence would "alter" the environment and "hamper

the fundamental goal of socialization and integration" of the residents into the community because of the relatively remote location of the house and the "deep-rooted and intense resistance of the community."

But at no time, opponents insist, was the presence of the residents themselves an issue.

"We are not a prejudiced community," says Karen Petrosino of Greenridge. "We are a well-educated community looking out for the well-being of our families. Should we let anybody come and do anything they want where we live and our children play without asking any questions?"

Objections generally include increased traffic

flow; the fear of plummeting property values; and the influx into the neighborhood of low-paid staffers who are not required by state law to undergo drug tests or criminal background checks.

However, many local human services providers say privately that fear of the developmentally disabled, borne out of ignorance, is the primary motive for protesting.

"It is about misinformation," says Joan Petersilia, a professor of criminology, law and society at the University of California, Irvine, and an expert on mental retardation. "The community perceives that mental retardation is mental illness."

Concord resident Andrea Cocozza, who opposes the establishment of a community residence slated for her block, admits the confusion.

"You don't know who you are getting in there," she says. "When I see mentally anything, I worry about that. Who knows what kind of mental they are talking about? It scares me a little bit."