

SPECIAL REPORT  
LIFE AFTER WILLOWBROOK

# Good neighbors blend right in

**Many Islanders report no problems with community residences in their areas**

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Practically everyone rallied against it.

A bucolic side street, one block from an intermediate school in Great Kills, was no place for a home for the developmentally disabled, Nash Court residents insisted in 1992. They predicted property values would plunge, children would be terrified, and retarded people would harass

**LAST IN A FOUR-PART SERIES**

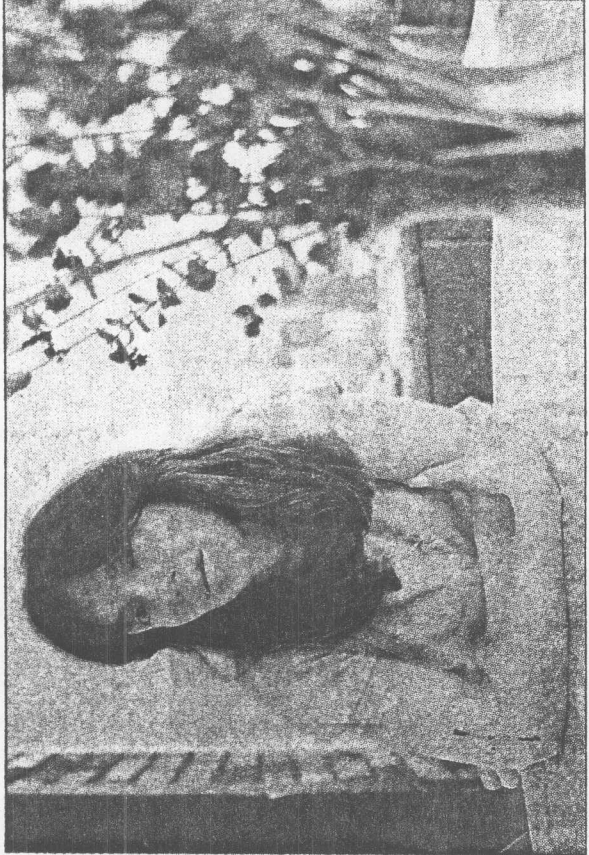
**SUNDAY** A vulnerable population  
**MONDAY** Questions about staffing  
**YESTERDAY** Heart-wrenching decisions  
**TODAY** Do they fit in?

**BOARD OKS USE OF HOME FOR 5 ADULTS**  
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like civilized people," she recalls.

Disgusted, Ms. Sweeney stopped attending meetings. Ultimately, the board rejected the site, but because the board's vote is not binding, the developmentally disabled settled there anyway.

Eight years later, Ms. Sweeney, a nurse and real estate agent, feels differently. "You really don't even know



ADVANCE PHOTO ■ ROB SOLLETT

Lisa Sweeney of Great Kills on the developmentally disabled in a nearby community residence: "You really don't even know that they're there. They're not a bother at all."

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# Neighbors

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that they're there," she says, sipping a cup of coffee in the middle of the day. "They're not a bother at all. They're better than the family that used to live there."

Ms. Sweeney is not the only Staten Islander who has come to accept her developmentally disabled neighbors as just that: Neighbors.

The Advance visited four community residences, chosen at random, and asked area residents, how, or if, their attitudes about the sites have changed over time.

Only four of 35 people had anything negative to say about the community residences in their neighborhoods. Situations may vary among the 127 residences scattered throughout the borough, but we discovered the following.

## Rosebank

In Rosebank, three or four times a day, Barbara Russo walks by a Beethoven Street community residence for 11 developmentally disabled adults with her 4-month-old grandson, Michael.

"I can't even say I see them," she says. "Even when they go out, there's a staff person helping them get on the bus."

Mrs. Russo remembers the cries against establishing the home in 1991.

"I attended one of the community board meetings," she says. "I couldn't see the objections. They were thinking it would be a home for juvenile delinquents."

But a Vietnam War veteran and his wife, living across the street from the house, find fault: Filthy surgical gloves litter the street about twice a month, say Robert and Santa Ottiano.

"I don't know if it's their fault, but I've found three or four laying in the street. When the wind blows they end up in front of my house," Ottiano says, downplaying his annoyance.

He's never filed a complaint with Independent Living Association, the Brooklyn-based agency that runs the Rosebank home.

"I don't own my house. I rent," he says. "I'm not a perfect person, you know."

The Ottianos also say they've seen the home's staff dump ash trays with cigarette butts and fast food containers into the street.

"It's like only a handful of people, 99 percent of [the staff] are fine," says Ottiano.

They hear distorted screams coming from the house regularly, too, they say, but the screams are the kind one would expect from adults with childlike thinking.

Overall, the home has actually blended into the community much better than the Ottianos had anticipated.

"It's not as bad as people think it is," says Ottiano. "You get lousy people no matter where you go. I thought it was going to be really bad, that they were going to overrun the neighborhood. But it's not like that."

When told of the surgical gloves found in the street, an Independent Living executive says it's the first he's heard of it.

"Right now, the garbage is bagged and kept neatly outside. We'll do better at it," says Arthur

Palevsky, associate executive director.

Surgical gloves are not used for any medical procedures; ill residents are taken to doctors serving the general public, says Palevsky. Community residential staff might use surgical gloves to handle food or apply lotion, he says.

A handful of the Ottianos' neighbors mention nothing of the garbage or surgical gloves, characterizing the developmentally disabled as non-threatening, non-invasive neighbors.

## Richmond Valley

On Madsen Avenue in Richmond Valley, a young mother allows her two small children to run past a community residence for 14 disabled people operated by United Cerebral Palsy of New York State, which opened in 1993. The children whiz past the home with only the sunshine as their chaperone.

Deborah Gaynor says she has no reason to fear for the safety of James, 8, and Jacqueline, 5.

"They keep it clean. It doesn't smell. I don't see anything," says Mrs. Gaynor, a police officer, who moved to the street in September.

Jacqueline has asked to play with a child — who uses a wheelchair — living in the community residence.

"My daughter asks a lot of questions," she says. "It's a lot of explaining to do."

Like many interviewed in various neighborhoods, Mrs. Gaynor is concerned about the future of community residences. She worries the Madsen Avenue place could turn into another social service provider. Her nightmare: A drug rehabilitation center.

It would be highly unlikely that any home used for residential services would no longer be needed, says Deborah Rausch, spokeswoman for the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities (OMRDD).

Private agencies that run homes for the developmentally disabled also own the property. If a private agency were to sell, it would sell it just as a private corporation would, says Ms. Rausch.

"If the state owned the land, the state would be required to offer the land for sale at public auction before transferring jurisdiction to another state department or agency," says Ms. Rausch.

Other Madsen Avenue residents are more optimistic about the future of the community residence for the developmentally disabled on their street.



Gazing toward the well-kept house with a long driveway, Loriann Santangelo and Kelly Campione, who are sisters, recall a block party, held two years ago.

"They were all outside for the magic show. We set it up right in front of their house," says Mrs. Santangelo, the mother of a 7-year-old daughter who has cerebral palsy and could need a similar residence when she grows up.

Ms. Campione, the mother of Michael, 8, and Thomas, 5, says she has no reason to shelter her sons from disabled people. On Halloween, the children trick-or-treat there just as they would at any other house.

Another woman who frequently visits her parents' home on Madsen Avenue recalls a time when staff members helped her father, who was ailing from emphysema.

"We ran for help and a nurse came with an oxygen tank," recalls Elaina Crema of Basking Ridge, N.J.

**South Beach**

Of nearly a dozen residents interviewed near a South Beach home for the developmentally disabled on McClean Avenue, none had anything negative to report.

Run by On Your Mark, a private not-for-profit human services provider, the home opened in 1992. Fights, unsupervised outings, excessive trash — all are non-existent there, say area residents.

**Great Kills**

Back on Nash Court, in Great Kills, a couple of residents still harbor ill feelings toward their developmentally disabled neighbors.

A woman hurriedly ushering her young sons into her home says children shouldn't be exposed to retarded people, but admits those down the block have not caused problems.

Another woman who lives next door to the Nash Court community residence says horn blowing wakes her at 7:30 a.m. every morning. The Advance didn't help keep the home from opening in 1991, so the woman will not answer any more questions, she says, slamming her front door shut.

Now, as Ms. Sweeney, the mother of four, who initially protested the home, does her spring cleaning, she thinks of the developmentally disabled living across the street.

When her daughters were ready to part with a box full of old toys, the mom encouraged, Tara, 8 and Dana, 9, to deliver the items to the disabled people's doorstep.

"There's all kinds of people in the world," says Ms. Sweeney. "Sometimes they don't come out perfect. But I tell my kids, God made everyone."

**No formal complaints**

Staten Island's three community boards and City Council members say they have no complaints on record from neighbors of existing community residences for the developmentally disabled.

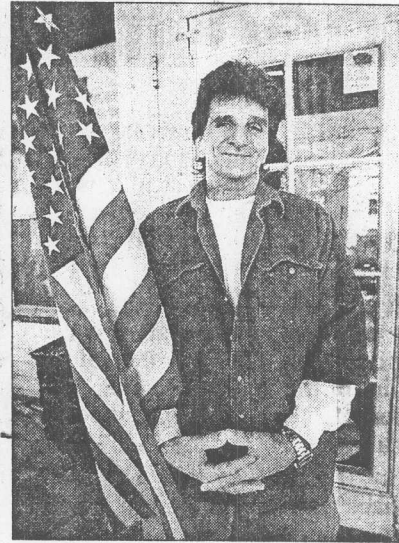
Likewise, there are no complaints registered with the Staten Island Developmental Disabilities Services Office (SIDDSO), the local arm of the state, said an agency spokeswoman.

The SIDDSO serves as the clearing house for complaints and can be reached by calling 983-5200.

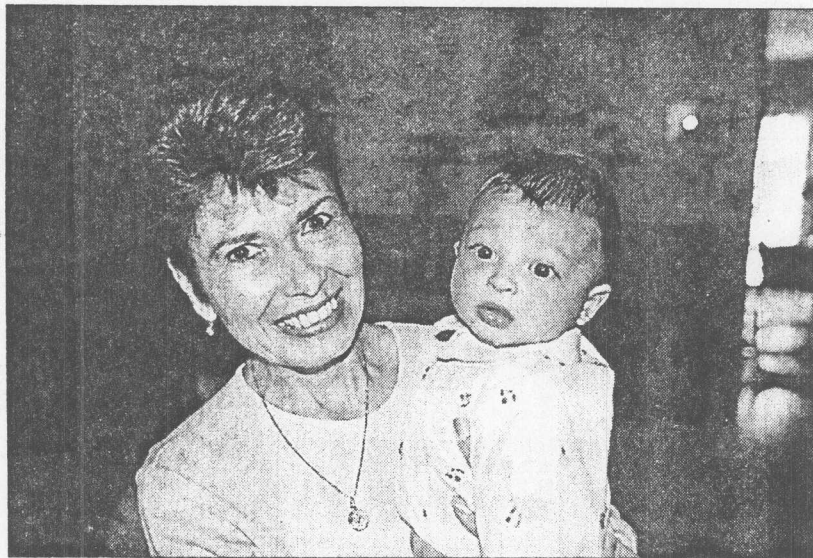


ADVANCE PHOTOS ■ ROB SOLLETT

Loriann Santangelo, left, of Richmond Valley, is the mother of a daughter with cerebral palsy and says she may need the help of a community residence some day. Joining her is neighbor Kelly Campione.



Robert Ottiano of Rosebank says he's found dirty surgical gloves on occasion near the residence in his community.



Barbra Russo, holding her grandson Michael Anthony Russo, says she doesn't notice any problems with residents in her Rosebank neighborhood.