

the Lifestyle Cafe, both Jim and Angela's personalities soon blossomed, according to staff members.

Jim now is "the main grill person" in the cafe, working under professional chef Christopher DeRenzi, a graduate of Johnson & Wales University's hospitality & restaurant management program.

Typical of the work done by Lifestyles for the Disabled, the parent agency, staff members devised an alphabetical code — since Jim can't read — to identify grill orders for him.

As the main grill person, Anderson, arrives for work each morning at about 7 a.m., and now has no trouble filling orders for eggs or French toast for breakfast and, with equal attention, turns out perfectly grilled hamburgers, Philly Steaks, quesadillas and daily specials for the lunch crowd.

"Jim's so happy about his work, we have trouble getting him off the grill so others can have a turn," said Beth Fromkin, deputy executive director of the parent agency, Lifestyles for the Disabled.

"The day treatment program wasn't for Angela," recalled Ms. Fromkin, speaking of Ms. Privitera's former placement. "Now she comes in here happy every day, sets up, serves the hot dogs and cleans up at the end — all by herself. Learning to work independently, in itself, is an achievement in any food operation."

"Their whole personalities come out working here; they learn to be more social together and get a feel for working with the public and handling food," said Ms. Fromkin, as she looked across the dining room to see Angela's smiling face looking at her from behind the well-stocked hot dog cart.

Elsewhere in the cafe, people, like Joe Pellecchia, work side-by-side with the chef; Mary Panese, meanwhile, cheerfully circles the tables, taking menu orders.



ADVANCE PHOTOS ■ IRVING SILVERSTEIN

Angela Privitera serves a patron at the Lifestyle Cafe.

Rotating jobs include cooking, waiting on tables, calling out order numbers and, in general, keeping the 50-seat eating area tidy and clean before the crew heads home at 3 p.m. Three times a week, a staff person escorts consumers, on a rotating basis, to neighborhood supermarkets where they buy fresh produce, replenish the cafe's perishable stock and, in general, learn the art of food shopping.

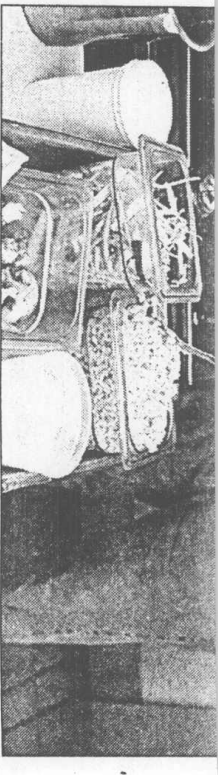
"They get the feeling of a productive environment; they know there's a real purpose to the work — they must get the product out," explained Ms. Fromkin. "Everyone has a responsibility."

The Lifestyle Cafe, a casual, open-to-the-public eatery, is now in its fourth year at 930 Willowbrook Rd. in Building 17H, on the grounds of the Staten Island Development Disabilities Services Office (SIDDSO).

As an agency, Lifestyles for the Disabled has been dedicated for the past six years to helping developmentally disabled Staten Islanders find the right work setting. With that as his goal, Richard Salinardi, the executive director, decided to launch the cafe concept.

A longtime faculty member at the Hungerford School, Clifton, Salinardi also is area coordinator for Special Olympics which started on Staten Island 28 years ago and now involves over 600 developmentally disabled borough residents.

"I saw the potential of our con-



Jim Anderson cooks in the kitchen of the Lifestyle Cafe.

sumers to work in the restaurant field," said Salinardi, who Ms. Fromkin calls the creative half of the executive team. "There probably aren't enough real hands-on training programs out there that go far enough. People hesitate to let the consumers work around a hot stove and do other work around a kitchen."

"This gives them an opportunity for real lifetime experiences. They have to have expectations: They have to have customers, a sense of pressure and a product people want to eat. I can honestly say we now have 15 to 20 people working in the cafe, many of them comfortable in the kitchen, learning knife skills, cooking and able to choose and buy the food they need."

In planning the cafe, Salinardi conferred with SIDDSO director Robert Witkowski about securing space, and before long the project was underway. Staff and consumers spent the next seven months cleaning stainless steel kitchen equipment, painting the walls, scrubbing down the floors and bringing in refrigeration.

"We brought in experts to consult and advise; we wanted them to give us a real critique of the place," said Salinardi. Peter Roscoe) Roskowsinski, owner of R.H. Tugs, Livingston, and Pete's Eats in Travis, who has a reputation for giving jobs to the disabled, was among those who came forward.

The staff knew they were on the right track when after helping in its set up, Roskowsinski returned

the cafe, checked it out and said: "I want to retire and work here." "Everybody was thrilled," recalled Salinardi.

The menu, which changes weekly and with daily specials, was developed by chef Christopher DeRenzi, a Staten Islander who attended Monsignor Farrell High School and graduated from Susan Wagner High School before setting out for Providence, R.I., to hone his culinary skills at Johnson & Wales University.

The staff is delighted with the variety of inventive dishes he's turned out since taking charge of the kitchen in February, 1999. "I spent time in fine dining restaurants, and I intended to pursue it for a while," said DeRenzi. "That was before I found there was something beyond the hustle and bustle of fine dining."

"I had no previous experience working with this population, but it's given me wonderful expertise," said DeRenzi. "It's very rewarding, and nice to have flexibility," he said, adding, "Everyone here is very much interested in learning; they want to succeed. You just have to have patience in teaching them the skills."

While many patrons enjoy a simple lunch, others are enticed by the chef's specials, including items like Pasta Primavera, combining broccoli, zucchini and carrots in a delicate cream sauce, shrimp risotto or his much-lauded salmon seared with steamed leeks and salmon club sandwich where the seafood is grilled and served

on seven-grain bread that's been lathered with basil pesto and topped with bacon, lettuce and tomato.

Another favorite with cafe patrons is DeRenzi's special of yellowfin tuna served with sesame noodles and a soy dipping sauce. "In a fine-dining restaurant you'd pay \$18 to \$20," said DeRenzi. "Here, the full meal costs less than \$5." Even prices on the regular menu — like a hamburger for \$1 and French fries for \$1.25 — won't break the bank.

In off hours and on weekends, the Lifestyle Cafe is open to consumers and their families, as well as those affiliated with Special Olympics, who have the option of using the room for private parties and family get-togethers.

"It's a wonderful opportunity for them; they can have the room set up, the boys and girls will cook and work at the party — and they get paid for it," explained Ms. Fromkin. "It's a wonderful place to come for a party — it's safe and there's no rental fee."

The restaurant program isn't for everyone, Ms. Fromkin admits, adding, "Some people don't like the pressure of working in this kind of environment; some wouldn't have the skills or the temperament."

"We teach them how to be successful at whatever they do by giving them opportunities to meet their skills, help them develop self-esteem and they work with a good support staff."