

Island news

Willowbrook's oldest 'grad' savors life now

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On his 87th birthday, Abraham Berkowitz sat up anxiously in his wheelchair and tasted his first sip of beer in years.

His smile said ecstasy, and his fellow mentally retarded patients in the Willowbrook group home cheered right along with the staff who had arranged the big event.

That day, the brisk sunny Friday of Nov. 18, belonged all to Abe. So does the distinction of the being the oldest client of the former Willowbrook State School who still resides on the grounds.

Berkowitz has spent the second half of his life housed on the estate that later became the Staten Island Developmental Center, and last year, the base for the Staten Island Developmental Disabilities Services Office (SIDDSO). He is the oldest client served by SIDDSO, the agency charged with overseeing the care of any Staten Islander with a developmental disability.

Berkowitz moved into one of three prototype group homes that opened last year as part of SIDDSO's 13-home Richmond Complex on the grounds.

In 1945, Berkowitz became one of the first clients at the Willow-

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brook school, before it reached notoriety for abhorrent treatment of the mentally retarded. His family had transferred him into the facility from an upstate institution, and he lived most of the time in Building 10 on the grounds.

According to one of the papers in a green binder thick with Berkowitz's case records, he was diagnosed as profoundly retarded with spasticity of the lower extremities. Also he is legally blind.

"He can see fine," said Judith Abt, team leader of the three-year-old Executive Way group homes.

He certainly had no problem ogling four bikini-clad beauties pictured on the poster he received for his birthday.

Unrolling the poster at his party, Berkowitz's grin widened to a full-fledged smile that grew even wider when he opened a calendar filled with more scantily clad women. He also liked the VCR, TV, winter scarf and silver stein he received, but the beer and "artistic" pictures clearly were his favorites.

"Abe has a fine taste for young women and old beer," said Robert Witkosky, SIDDSO director, who

attended the afternoon bash.

"Every night he asks for a beer," Ms. Abt said. Because of his medication, Berkowitz usually has to settle for non-alcoholic beer, but his physician cleared the way for Abe to have a light beer on his birthday.

"He's very verbal... he's sort of the life of the whole building. He has the most energy," Ms. Abt said. She's known him since 1969, and he's been under her supervision for the past four years. "He loves music — anytime he hears music he starts beating his fingers like he has a drum. He watches the news and loves to tell me stories. He's very pleasant."

"He's charming and funny — he makes everyone laugh," said Inam Siddiqi, a social worker.

Though his speech is difficult for a stranger to comprehend, Berkowitz's expressions and gestures at the party needed no interpretation. Handsome in a gray suit, he stopped smiling and laughing only to enjoy his beer and ice-cream cake.

"All week long he's been talking about this party," Ms. Abt said. And on the morning of the main event, Berkowitz was thrilled by a birthday visit from his 75-year-old brother, David, from Florida.

"Abe is exactly how I would like to be when I'm 87," Lennox Tannis, residence manager, said. "He's kind of a George Burns."

(This is the last in a series of five articles.)

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