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During a break between night classes, a hallway on the College of Staten Island campus in St. George fills with students who shout hellos, pause to chat, and head for the drinking fountain, the bathrooms or their next course.

It's a typical campus scene, but with a twist — many of the students are mentally retarded.

They're enrolled in The Creative Exchange, a program of the college's Office of Continuing Education that offers courses for 110 mentally retarded adults, about half of them former residents of the former Willowbrook State School and the Staten Island Developmental Center.

Now in its 13th year, it is one of only two programs in the United States to offer classes for the retarded at the same place most other adults find continuing education — on a college campus.

Creative Exchange students take courses "the way any adult would go in and take a class for personal enrichment," said Dr. Carol Sonnenblick, program director, a specialist in educational psychology. "This is just another facet of adult education."

About 75 students take courses in St. George, and 35 are enrolled at the program's "southern campus," in St. Paul's United Methodist Church in Tottenville.

Like other students, those in The Creative Exchange attend classes two nights a week from 6:30 to 9 p.m., some after working all day. Like other students, they are there because they want to learn.

A young man named Anthony rides a city bus from Brooklyn to get to the St. George campus after working as a food-service handler during the day. He comes to improve his reading and math skills, he says with a shy smile.

On a recent night, teacher Gail Hutchinson helped Anthony and a fellow student, Fred, review a lesson on everyday skills — how to recognize signs such as bus stops, traffic lights, warnings on medicine bottles and emergency telephone numbers.

In the next classroom, paints, pencils and pastels are scattered across desks in Art Therapy. Frances, a gray-haired woman in pearls, rapidly adds the finishing touches to a pencil-and-ink draw-

ing as the ringing of a hand-held school bell ripples in from the hallway, where Dr. Sonnenblick is signaling the end of the first class.

Three 40-minute sessions are offered each evening, with topics ranging from "Telling Time" to "Psychology" and "Creatures of the Ocean." A perennial favorite is "Calculator Math," and a cooking class will be added next year by popular demand.

In "Understanding Sports and Competition," it's bowling night. Teacher Robert Yurman, who doubles as assistant director of security for the St. George campus, keeps score on the chalkboard. Harry, a wheelchair-bound student, rolls a ball down a ramp propped up on his wheelchair to knock down two of six plastic pins across the room.

"What do we call that?" asks Yurman.

"A split!" the six men in the room call out.

Giving students a chance to learn the everyday ways of the world is an important goal of the program, says Dr. Sonnenblick — a goal that's served by the location of the classes as well as by the classes themselves.

The program began as part of the trend toward deinstitutionalizing services for the developmentally disabled, which started in the mid-1970s. "My feeling is, if we're going to share the community, then we've got to learn about each other, and that goes both ways," adds Dr. Sonnenblick.

She sends a memo to the college's students at the beginning of each year to inform them of the program, and she reports — with a cautious knock on wood — that there have never been any problems between students sharing the halls.

While college students learn to co-exist with a group of people they don't normally meet, students in The Creative Exchange benefit by observing how others act and dress. "They're much more aware of what's going on in the world," said Dr. Sonnenblick.

The two student bodies are different in more ways than one. Those in The Creative Exchange — as well as their teachers — exhibit an enthusiasm that's hard to match.

"My sister-in-law looks forward to (classes) tremendously," said John DeSio of Eltingville. When his sister-in-law Barbara enrolled four years ago, he joined up too — as a teacher.

An employee of the City of New York by day, he teaches "Counting Money," "Your Body and How It Works," and other classes at both sites. "Believe it or not, most students like some kind of homework," he said.

The staff of 16 is equally committed. "We as teachers try to give our all. You can't just go in there and give information; you kind of have to perform a little bit," DeSio said.

"I love it," he added. "Many times you're trying to teach, and it's difficult, and you feel you're not getting through. But every now and then you look at a client and you know they really understand."

Working at each student's level is important, he said. "Some won't talk at first, and then they participate, which I feel is a big accomplishment."

Most students who enroll come back year after year. "We have a lot of people who've been with us since I've been here," said Dr. Sonnenblick, director since 1981.

The program started with 20 students, and now has a waiting list of 40 names on top of its 110 enrollment. It is funded by grants from the city Department of Mental Health, Mental Retardation and Alcoholism Services, last year at a cost of about \$100,000.

"This is the first year that I've absolutely said we would not take in any more than our present number of students," said Dr. Sonnenblick, a hint of doubt in her voice.

"It's manageable," she said, and then laughed. "A hundred and ten people is a lot. And that's as big as it's getting."