

Down's Learning Center to close

But founder hasn't given up

By SHERRY BOSCHERT
ADVANCE STAFF WRITER

Teri Russo started a poem recently. She calls it "Requiem for a Dream."

An Advance Woman of Achievement in 1988, Ms. Russo is watching one of her dreams come undone, a casualty of changing social priorities.

Twenty years ago she founded the Down's Syndrome Learning Center on Staten Island and 15 years ago expanded it from an infant stimulation program to include training and academics for school-age youngsters with Down's syndrome, a form of congenital retardation.

While state funds help support the infant program, the school-age classes rely on tuition from parents and donations from the public. Now, those donations have dried up.

"We can no longer afford to keep this program going," Ms. Russo said.

In the last few years, there's been a shift in donations to the homeless and AIDS (Acquired Im-



Teri Russo helps her son, Damian, with his reading.

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mune Deficiency Syndrome), and away from the handicapped," she said. In addition, changes in tax laws have removed some incentives for donations.

Of six school-age children at the Pleasant Plains center this year, four have left the area or been placed in public school programs. The remaining two — including Ms. Russo's 11-year-old son Damian — must be placed by September, a move she does not relish.

"I still feel he could benefit from another year or two of this program before moving on," she said.

Too often, she believes, children with Down's Syndrome are given only "functional" training through the public schools, such as learning colors, shapes, hygiene and basic socialization. Students remain highly dependent on others.

"Our fight is to have them at the educable level," Ms. Russo said. "Along with basic functions, our kids are learning academics" at the center, and becoming more independent. "What we do is combine programs and give them the best of both."

Providing that service has cost about \$35,000 per year, a sum that tuition alone cannot cover. Ms. Russo has set her sights on raising money so that school-age classes can be revived by the time the 11 infants at the center come of age.

"We'll have at least a three-year period to build a fund" because those children range from 18 months to 2 years old, she noted.

General fund-raising is ongoing, and special events will be scheduled as well. A 20-year reunion of the center's students is set for April 22 at the Labetti Post, Veterans of Foreign Wars, Rosebank.

"We're hoping to find all the children who have passed through the program. I personally wrote out over 200 invitations. I couldn't believe it," she said. Former staff of the center also are invited. "We thought they'd enjoy seeing how the kids turned out."

Her thoughts are now focused on how her son, Damian, might turn out if the Board of Education's Committee on Special Education (CSE) slots him toward a functional education.

"It's always a fight to get them into the classes that we know they're ready for" in intermediate schools, according to Ms. Russo.

She speaks from experience. All three of her adopted sons have Down's syndrome, and she has managed to get the two older boys into special education classes that include academics, but only

after years of fighting and appeals.

Of three of the center's students remaining on Staten Island who are old enough for intermediate school, only one has received the more advanced program placement from the CSE so far.

Disagreements on the kind of education suitable for a child hinge on that ultimate tool of academia: Testing.

Kenny Tobin, 12, performed poorly when tested by the CSE recently for placement. The committee recommended him for a functional-level class.

"His marks were low, which is normal for Down's syndrome kids. They always test lower than what they can actually do," said Dennis Tobin of Tottenville, the boy's father.

Kenny can read, do basic math and write in script, among other things, according to Tobin and Ms. Russo. "We're not denying that he's retarded and saying he's a genius, but we're saying he can be educated more than how to survive," Tobin stated.

The boy's parents took him to a state-run agency for three additional psychological tests, two of which were rejected by the CSE. Kenny failed the third by one point, his father says.

"There are certain exams that the Board of Education for years has not been allowed to use because they've been determined to be not statistically valid," explained Thomas Dugan, chairman of the CSE.

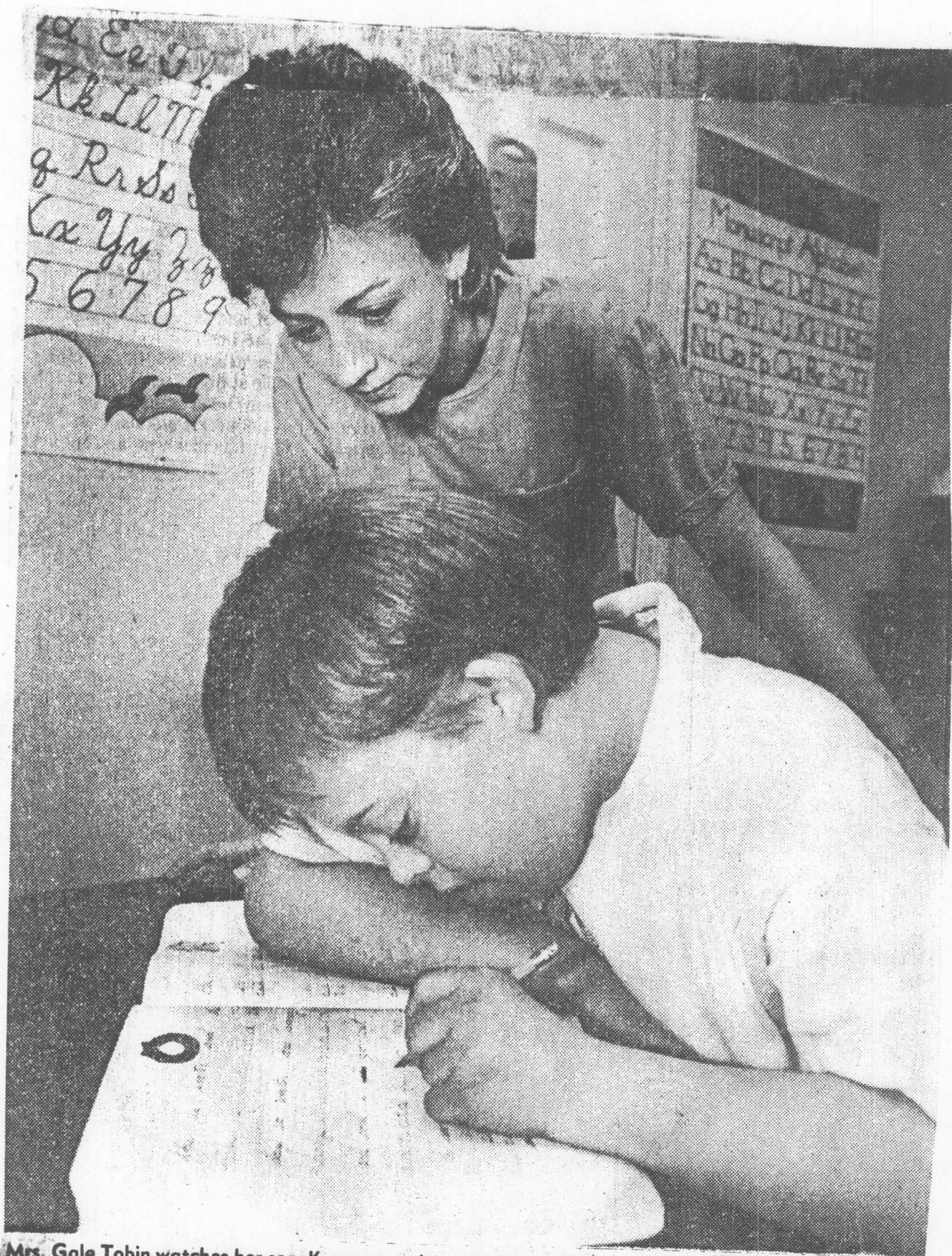
A psychologist, special education specialist, social worker and parent of a handicapped child sit on the committee, which conducts about 4,000 reviews of cases per year.

"Some information is open to interpretation. Just because a parent wants something doesn't mean it's in the best interest of the child," Dugan said.

The Tobins have scheduled an IQ test prior to their CSE appeal Friday. If the committee does not change its stance, they will call for an impartial hearing, the next step in the appeal process. Beyond that, they would sue the Board of Education.

"I'm going to go the limit, same as the Tobins," Ms. Russo said. "This is my son, and I think he's entitled to a good education, not just an adequate education."

Part of her dream of better education for Down's syndrome children will end when Damian and Kenny leave the program. Given her past struggles in transferring her sons to public schools, she is hoping now that the dream doesn't end in an ongoing nightmare.



Mrs. Gale Tobin watches her son, Kenny, practice writing in script.

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