

A HOME OF THEIR OWN

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quiet Staten Island neighborhood—not for the human warehouse that used to be there. In 1986 New York State closed the institution and opened 12 residential apartments for the mentally retarded on the outskirts of its former 382-acre site; 48 AB Executive Way is one of them. The women who moved there, however, have more than new addresses. They have new lives.

Nowadays Jean and her friends go dancing, attend special schools in their community and enjoy boat trips and hayrides in the country. With help from the staffers who work at their home, they clean house and shop for their own clothing and groceries.

All told, 11 staffers work at 48 AB Executive Way in three shifts, along with a recreation therapist, social worker, dietitian, psychologist, nurse and speech therapist, who are also responsible for other residences.

"The minute these women came here, they began to get better. Their turnaround has been almost miraculous," says Marie Ortiz, a former Willowbrook employee who is now the apartment's manager and a part-time surrogate mother to the women who live there. "In Willowbrook they were treated like animals. Now they're a family."

Not everyone in the family came from Willowbrook. Susan, at 27 the family's junior member, came to Executive Way from her mother's Staten Island apartment. And not all of the women were born mentally retarded. At age four, Rose came down with scarlet fever, then contracted encephalitis, an inflammation of the brain that left her with a progressive form of mental retardation.

This Christmas season the women will travel to see the giant tree at Rockefeller Center—a shimmering emblem of the New York holiday season. They'll dine by candlelight on roast turkey, cranberry sauce and hot biscuits. And they'll attend their annual Christmas disco/pageant, where they'll sit on Santa Claus's lap and ask him for gifts.

But this Christmas, along with the packages they'll receive from Santa, their families and the apartment's staff, there will be other gifts. Jean and Mary seldom lash out anymore. Sixty-nine-year-old Marcia, who had been ripping out her hair by the handful when she moved into her new home, has grown back a gorgeous head of snow-white hair. Sally, age 40, who used to be "hell on wheels," according to a former staffer at the institution, now does her wheeling around on the dance floor. And the greatest gift of all just might be the apartment itself—and the kinship it has engendered.

"They found each other," says Ortiz, "and that has made all the difference."

Willowbrook had been conceived amid great expectations: It was to be the first state institution for the mentally retarded to admit children under five years of age. But almost immediately after Willowbrook opened in 1947, its population began to soar. By 1956 the institution, built to accommodate about 3,100 residents, held 3,900. By 1962, after an expansion program that increased Willowbrook's capacity by 1,200 beds, the school's population had swelled to 6,200. Under such conditions, individual attention was virtually impossible, says Katy Tucker, a staffer at 48 AB Executive Way who started working at Willowbrook in 1958. Resident-staff ratios often exceeded 100 to 1. Children were herded to meals "in packs, like cattle," she recalls, and they often went weeks without a shower or change of clothes. Because of the filth and overcrowding, intestinal diseases, such as shigella, swept through the population. In May of 1965 a ten-year-old boy was scalded to death in a shower, partly because of the school's archaic plumbing. A month later a 12-year-old suffocated to death when a restraining apparatus loosened and became wound around his neck.

Such was the Willowbrook that Jean found upon her admission there. Responding to the squalor and neglect, she lost an eye through self-abuse, staffers acknowledge.

In 1972, amid steadily deteriorating conditions, Mary's mother and scores of other Willowbrook parents finally revolted. Aided by the American Civil Liberties Union, they filed suit against New York State. At about the same time, more than a dozen other states—including Illinois, Pennsylvania and Texas—became involved in similar litigation. As these cases were settled, plans were laid to close or trim many institutions and to place their residents in community-based group foster homes. In the early 1970s there were no more than a handful of group homes; now group homes serve an estimated 114,000 clients. Some homes, like those on Executive Way, have been built on the grounds of dismantled institutions, but most are in regular communities. Because of the group-home movement, the institutional count of retarded people fell from 194,650 in 1967 to 94,696 in 1987. According to the most recent survey by the Association for Retarded Citizens of the United States, at least 64,000 people are on waiting lists to enter community-based facilities. And what began as an experiment in social services has emerged as a dramatic success.

It's daybreak at Willowbrook. In the eerie half-light, one can see that the windows of the empty, low-slung ward

