

## A HOME OF THEIR OWN

continued

Project. "After all, if they could live in homes, the question became, Why didn't the family keep them in the first place?"

Perhaps the most formidable obstacle to group homes, though, has been resistance from the neighborhoods and townships in which they've been located. According to Ellen Ashton of the New York State Office of Mental Retardation/Developmental Disabilities, four facilities in the New York area were set on fire when they were under construction or renovation: in Queens in 1987, in Northport in 1981, in Shirley/Mastic in 1980 and in Huntington in 1978. In 1985 neighbors in Russell Gardens, a Long Island community, tried less violent tactics: They chipped in and bought a house to keep it from becoming a group home.

Elsewhere, municipalities have passed laws designed to exclude the mentally handicapped. In 1980, citing a regulation barring "hospitals for the feeble-minded," the city council of Cleburne, Texas, denied a zoning permit for a group home. In 1985 the U.S. Supreme Court unanimously agreed that the permit was unconstitutionally denied; subsequently, 13 retarded men and women moved into the house.

A flyer taped to the wall of a down-

stairs bathroom at 48 AB Executive Way reads BEING MENTALLY RETARDED NEVER PREVENTED ANYONE FROM BEING A GOOD NEIGHBOR. But given the terror that group homes have generated, how many neighborhoods really have given the mentally retarded that chance?

The Russell Gardens episode ended on a happy note. On appeal, a New York State Supreme Court justice ruled that the residents' purchase of the prospective group home was illegal. The state eventually purchased the house, and 12 mentally retarded men and women moved in. The new arrivals then threw a coming-out party for their neighbors, serving them bagels and cream cheese, cakes, cookies and hot coffee.

Staten Island also has had its share of success stories. "One group home in my neighborhood caused a lot of flak," says Lisa Piper, a Staten Islander and a recreation therapist who used to work with the women of 48 AB. "The neighbors didn't like it, but eventually they began to talk to the residents and get to know them." The happy climax came two Christmases ago. "A couple of people brought over a huge gingerbread house and a fruit basket," she says. "The residents here were delighted."

Tonight what's on tap at 48 AB is a combination Christmas-New Year's

celebration with the men from 47 Executive Way—the apartment next door. In one room some of the residents, including Sally, Rose and Susan, gather to fashion sparkling papier-mâché ornaments out of Styrofoam balls and red and green foil. Marcia shuttles back and forth between the craft room and the refreshment table, toting chocolate-chip cookies, cups of vanilla ice cream and steaming flasks of hot cocoa. Mary alternates between urging some of the shyer residents onto the dance floor and clamoring for a counselor to play Michael Jackson on the stereo. Jean claps her hands in time to the pounding disco beat.

Christmas at the old Willowbrook wasn't terrible, recalls Katy Tucker. The buildings were decorated, and there was a tree in each one. The tragedy, she says, was that the makeover was only cosmetic, and once Christmas was over, Willowbrook reverted to form. "I stopped by one of the Willowbrook buildings the other day," says Marie Ortiz, "and you know, it might sound crazy, but I can still hear the kids crying out. When I worked there, I used to cry too."

Ortiz isn't crying anymore. Nor are her "kids." "This home is filled with peace and love," she declares.

Come to think of it, kind of like Christmas itself. ■

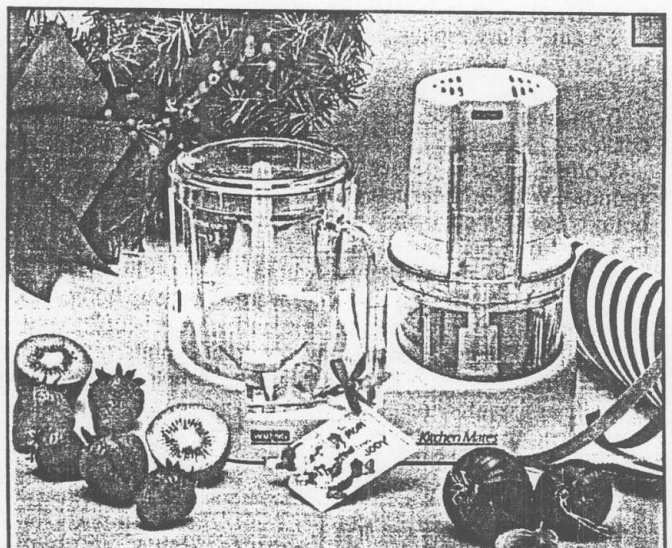


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