

Family Care: 'It's like one big family'

William does not talk much about the outrageous and silent atrocities of the old Willowbrook State School.

A former resident of the defunct institution for the mentally retarded, where he lived from the age of 11 to 51, William much prefers to chat about how he charms the ladies every Monday on the dance floor in the senior center.

At 88, he giggles unabashedly. "I love to dance," he says, getting up from a living room chair to render a little twist. "I got a lot of friends — a lot of women," he brags sweetly.

He is completely comfortable in the Annadale house of Beatrice Patrick, a stranger to William until she became his "family care provider" 16 years ago.

"This is my home," William says.

"Isn't it a pleasure to hear someone say that," beams Ms. Patrick, a perky 74-year-old. Actually, it is often heard from developmentally disabled adults in the borough's Family Care program, which operates along the lines of foster parenting for clients 21 and older.

"I was like an orphan," said 47-year-old Franklin, also a one-time Willowbrook resident. "I like the program very good. They treat me like my real mother and father that I don't have. It's like one big family."

During the day, most clients attend programs, including shel-



Laura Bruno

ABOUT STATEN ISLAND

tered workshops, or they hold jobs in the community.

Many were once residents of Willowbrook and its successor, the Staten Island Developmental Center, which closed in 1987.

Under the jurisdiction of the Staten Island Developmental Disabilities Services Office (SIDDSO), the Family Care program is sponsored by the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities.

Technically, the program has existed for 60 years, but it didn't take off until after the Willowbrook Consent Decree, said Karyn Snyder, borough coordinator of Family Care.

The 1975 landmark decision, which resulted from investigations into the abhorrent treatment of Willowbrook residents in the 1960s, ordered that developmentally disabled clients be housed in small, community-based pro-

grams in their home regions. Currently, about 70 Staten Island families care for more than 100 clients, Ms. Snyder said. "We are in desperate need of new Family Care providers. . . . We need hundreds," Ms. Snyder said.

Many clients on the waiting list currently live in various congregated-care centers; many live with family members who now are dying or getting too old to care for them.

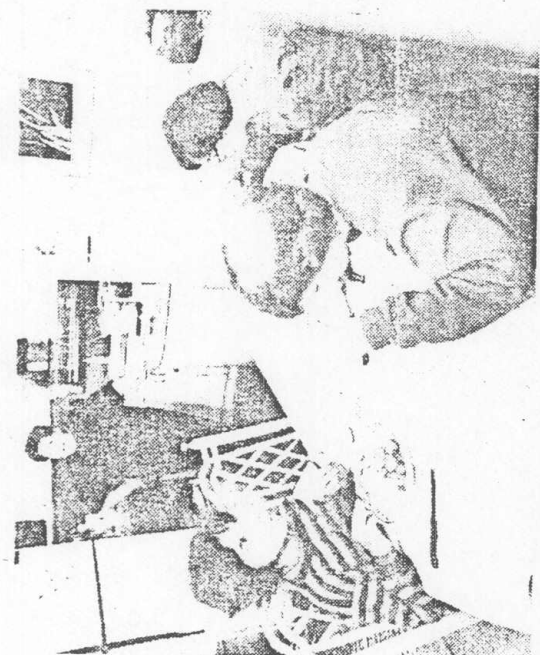
Family Care providers must be older than 21, but they may be married or single, employed or unemployed, home-owner or apartment-renter. They must undergo rigorous background screenings, a probationary period and continual monitoring, Ms. Snyder said.

Providers receive a monthly stipend of \$560 per client and are entitled to two annual vacations, for which they receive funds to pay an approved friend or relative to substitute as providers.

SIDDSO trains providers and affords case managers who supervise an array of services for clients, including recreation, vacations, day trips and medical, dental and psychological services. Clients receive \$75-\$85 a month in SSI (Supplemental Security Income).

Before Family Care placements are made, clients spend weekends with potential care providers to make sure the match is a good one, Ms. Snyder said.

It is not uncommon for a care



ADVANCE PHOTOS/MIKE FALCO

Eleonor Boffo, standing, supervises dinner for her three Family Care charges.

provider to house more than one client, but the limit is four, she said.

In addition to William, Ms. Patrick also cares for Vivian, a senior who turns out phenomenally detailed quilts and other sewing crafts.

Eleonor Boffo, a 64-year-old New Brighton resident who worked 13 years as an attendant at Willowbrook, never seems to run out of hugs for the three 21-

year-old women who live with her.

She's had two of them since they were 2 and 5, and the third for the past two years. "She came for a week and stayed two years," Ms. Boffa said affectionately.

At dinner time recently, in her pristine kitchen, "Mommy" bantered with the women who responded like loving children.

"How could you not love them?" Ms. Boffa asked.

Another Family Care client remembers clearly what it was like not to be loved. Twenty years ago, when James was 6 and living at Willowbrook, he used to be shoved into walls a lot, he said.

Now, living with three other clients in the care of a Mariners Harbor couple, he is secure.

He's a Mets fan, loves fried chicken and vanilla ice cream, and at the time of a recent interview, he was thinking about asking his friend Theresa out on a date.

James was wearing a pair of orange sneaker laces imprinted with the New Kids on the Block logo. "I just bought them," he said.

Besides New Kids, he also likes the more classic strains of Elvis Presley. "The king of rock'n'roll" he yelled, smiling. "Jail House Rock" is his favorite Elvis song. Refusing an opportunity to sing it, James shook his head, blushing but still smiling.

It was a big smile, full of teeth.

He's happy, he said, and because of his Family Care providers, he doesn't have to be lonely any more.

"I don't want to ever move again," James said.

Further information on the Family Care program is available by calling Karyn Snyder weekdays, from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., at 720-5514