

First, we could not find real estate firms that would take us as clients. Once we finally overcame Realtors' fears, we would go to the community to ask permission to move in. Inevitably, we were told, "it is a wonderful idea, but not here."

Sound familiar?

Then the list of excuses would come.

"There are too many; they will cause sanitation back up."

"There is a brook nearby; it is too dangerous."

"The coming and going of the staff will cause traffic jams."

"We have too many welfare people already."

"Our property value will go down."

I even had a group at a church meeting tell me, "If you come here we will burn you down."

However, in July 1977, under the auspices of the Volunteers of America, we opened the first group home in Mariners Harbor.

We were able to open because a group of seniors supported us. They were led by a woman known as Sophie Wolfe who had been in a concentration camp during World War II.

"I know what not being wanted means," she said. Supported by her friends, she stood with us and faced the community.

She and her friends came into the home. They worked alongside our tenants.

The seniors taught our tenants that the world is not totally hostile. They helped them to learn to cook and to deal with their medical problems. They served on our advisory board. They ran our cake sales and celebrated the holidays with us. They became our friends.

The complex was new when we moved in. As soon as the other tenants arrived, vandalism began. The elevators were covered with graffiti; locks were continually broken. This was not done by our supervised tenants.

In 1979, we approached the management of the complex.

"We would like to open some independent apartments. Would you consider letting us do it here?"

We were told that management would be pleased, but that we would have to speak to the other tenants.

We went to Sophie and asked what her senior group thought. They took a vote. It was a unanimous "yes." The success of the project was impressive.

In 1983, shortly before I decided to resign, management approached the Volunteers of America and offered the use of a townhouse for our clients.

We immediately sent a proposal to the proper sources and I am delighted to say eight very happy men are living productively and comfortably in those quarters.

When we were trying to educate the community as to who and what a developmentally disabled person is, we spent many weeks in schools with young people, hours with service clubs, their auxiliaries, and PTAs. We thought that young people listened and heard what we said.

It is 17 years later. They are the adults now, and each time I read of another group home being rejected, accompanied by the same tired litany of complaints, I wonder if they did hear us.

Perhaps it is not that "a child shall lead them."

Maybe it is the seniors who will have to do it.

*(Beatrice Victor was the chairwoman of the Staten Island Regional Retardation and Disabilities Council).*

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