

# S.I. Aid's work program is working out well

By PATRICK JOYCE  
ADVANCE STAFF WRITER

Bundling a huge bale of compacted rubbish using heavy machinery and steel wire is no easy task. But Christopher Johnson thinks at some point he will learn to do it.

Studying for her high school equivalency exam while she works as a home health aid for two women in their 90s has been a challenge, but Donna Williamson is pretty sure that given time, she will take the test and pass.

And Laura DeFranco, a maintenance worker in the Staten Island Children's Museum, is 42 years old and holding down her first job outside a special program. Exuding confidence, she saunters through the museum's halls as though she owns them.

Even if these three Staten Islanders were not mentally retarded, their goals and achievements might seem formidable. But they are, and while they live with a disability, they work despite it.

Johnson, Ms. Williamson and Ms. DeFranco are among 13 developmentally disabled Staten Islanders who work in the community with help from Staten Island Aid Inc., a private foundation that serves the developmentally disabled.

The "supported work" has allowed the 13 individuals to take great strides in their personal development, Staten Island Aid says.

In most cases, they perform their particular jobs nearly as well as their non-disabled co-workers. In the work setting, their disability fades into the background. "You wouldn't be able to pick them out of a crowd," said Tony Esposito, the foundation's program coordinator.

"We don't push them out there

screaming and kicking," said Jeannie Vok, a Staten Island Aid job coach. All but one of the supported workers spent somewhere from a few months to 10 years in Staten Island Aid's sheltered workshop in Tompkinsville.

There, they worked alongside other "high-functioning" disabled individuals doing contract jobs, like assembling picture frames or sewing kits, or serving on the workshop's maintenance or cafeteria staff. The program helps more than 160 clients build self-confidence and develop specific skills.

When Gaeta Services Inc. first agreed to hire mentally retarded workers, Staten Island Aid rushed three people over to begin new jobs. It quickly became clear that two of them were not able to work around the bulldozers and giant hills of refuse.

## Still works at yard

Christopher Johnson, however, stayed on for more than a year and still walks to work at the yard on Van Street in West Brighton.

Rather than standing out, he is as much a part of the operation as any of the other employees. When private garbage carters throughout the city walked off their jobs on strike recently, Johnson went with them.

"We understand him," a co-worker said. Explaining new tasks takes time, and when Johnson makes a mistake, there's occasional yelling. But Johnson takes it in stride.

"I have to watch out, be careful with the machinery and everything," said Johnson. "I keep on trying to do my best."

His employer said he has made progress. "There's never any problems with his performance here," said Claire Bullen, Gaeta's director of research and business development. "He really goes

above and beyond."

While he once worked full time outside in the yard, which Ms. Bullen said is dangerous work for anyone, he now works inside at a paper and cardboard baling machine. Help was needed there after another employee left, Ms. Bullen said.

To be sure, he still works around potential dangers. With the huge baler compressing garbage at his side and other machinery around him, he relies on himself and his co-workers to avoid the dangers.

## Perfect match

Mary Roperti, 92, and Florence Achille, 99, need a lot of care. Donna Williamson is very independent-minded. Together five days a week, they make a perfect match.

A home health-care aid, Ms. Williamson does everything from making coffee to locking the doors at night and setting the sisters' Lifeline thermometers.

"When I see them wobbling, I will walk behind them," Ms. Williamson said. The sisters confirm this. Every step of the way, they say, she is there.

A year ago, after one of the sisters came out of the hospital, Esposito suggested to Mrs. Roperti's daughter-in-law, Rose Roperti, that she hire Ms. Williamson.

"When she first came, they didn't know whether they wanted someone from the outside," Rose Roperti said.

But any doubts faded with time. "She's best at everything she does here," Rose Roperti said. "We don't consider Donna a disabled person. She's a very capable person."