

# 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."

Ms. Williamson, who is in her early 20s, takes the bus every day from the group home where she lives with other developmentally disabled persons to the Roperti's house in Dongan Hills. She studies for her high school equivalency exam in the Creative Exchange Program at the College of Staten Island. She has been moved twice to more advanced classes, Esposito said.

Once an abused child who left home and sought help from counselors at the North Richmond Community Mental Health Center, she now wants a life that is all her own.

"I want to get my GED (general equivalency diploma), get my own apartment and live a happy life," Ms. Williamson said. She acknowledges the inevitable difficulty in clearing the hurdles ahead. "But I can handle it," she said.

### Has plenty to do

Laura DeFranco recently went on a diet. For lunch, she brings cottage cheese and tuna fish to work at the Staten Island Children's Museum in the Snug Harbor Cultural Center. She refuses to eat her mother's lasagna for dinner.

Five days a week, Ms. DeFranco cleans the museum's exhibits and rooms, and she couldn't be more satisfied, it seems. As one of four maintenance employees, she has plenty to do.

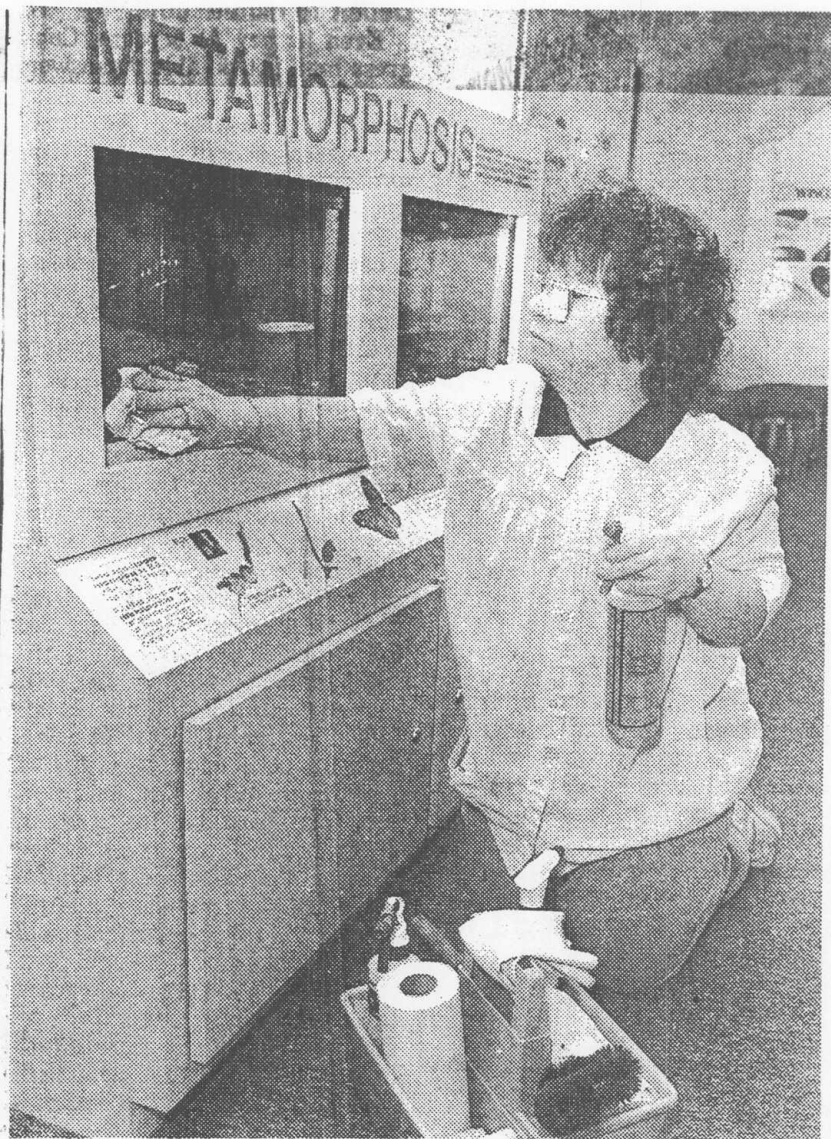
"I like it. It gets me out of the house," she said.

But she worked for nearly 10 years in Staten Island Aid's sheltered workshop and as an aide in a day care program for the disabled before getting there. Standing in the museum recently with tears in her eyes, she thanked Ms. Vok, the job coach, for the opportunity.

"She never had any qualms about not being able to handle it," said Joseph DeFranco, her father. "It's just a matter of getting a break."

Laura has always been full of self-confidence, so more than anything else the museum job gave her the chance to put it to good use, her father said.

"She loves the work and they



Laura DeFranco cleans an exhibit in the Staten Island Children's Museum, her first job outside a special program for the developmentally disabled.

love her," DeFranco said. If her work is not finished by the end of the day, she stays late, something her father discourages if it's not absolutely necessary. "In fact, they tell her to slow down a little bit because she's so active."

### Problems usually minor

When problems arise with any of the 13 workers, most often they are minor, Ms. Vok said. A worker forgetting to take a lunch break, for instance, or one taking too many breaks. In those cases Ms. Vok determines what is wrong and attempts a resolution before a conflict arises. All that may be needed is a co-worker's reminder or a simple lesson in reading a clock face.

Among the other employers of Staten Island Aid clients are the Plymouth Mills Garment Factory, Roy Rogers, Pizza Hut and the Showplace Bowling Center.

Although none of the workers who made it past a trial period has had to leave a job, Staten Island Aid says that circumstance would not be the end of the world for them. "If they fail, we're always here for them," Esposito said. "They can always return to the workshop and start all over again."

Staten Island Aid receives federal funds distributed by the state and additional financial support from United Way of Staten Island and New York Community Trust.



Christopher Johnson was able to hold down a job at the Gaeta Rubbish Removal yard despite doubts that he would be able to work around heavy equipment.



Donna Williamson, a home health aide who is developmentally disabled, pours coffee for Florence Achilli and Mary Roperti in their Dongan Hills home.

ADVANCE PHOTOS/IRVING SILVERSTEIN

Page 3 of 3 Pages