

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.