



ADVANCE PHOTO/JAN SOMMA

Members of this group home like to relax by watching television and reading in the living room.

# Group homes win friends

## Most neighbors pleasantly surprised

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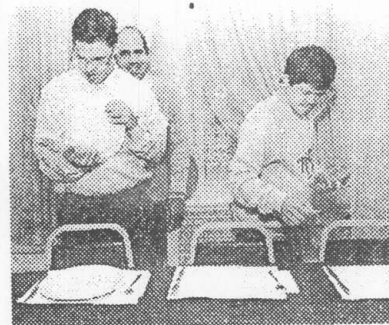
Bob Ottiano harbored the same worries most of his neighbors had when Project Hope, a group home for 11 mentally retarded men, was proposed for 43 Beethoven St., Fort Wadsworth.

What would these people, these strangers, be like? Would they stalk the street, night and day, unsupervised? What would the home look like after they moved in? How about parking and traffic? And what about the value of his property should he try to sell — would it decrease?

After living across the street from the home for nearly a year, Ottiano discovered the answers to all the questions ... except the last one. He has no plans to sell his house.

"I was opposed to it (the group home) at first, because I didn't know what was going in. You're dealing with the state, and you never know what they're going to throw at you," Ottiano said as he stood on the front lawn of his Hope Avenue home, about three houses down from Project Hope. "It's a whole different ball game than what I thought it was going to be. It's like night and day."

The state has plans to open or sponsor 20 new group homes in Community Boards 2 and 3 before the end of next year, and others in Community Board 1 are in the process of opening now.



## Group home dilemma

The fears of Hope Avenue homeowners are common for neighbors of the sites chosen by the state for group homes. Similar feelings drove residents of Cromwell Avenue in Dongan Hills to fight a group home on their block all the way to court. Ten years later, the home, operated by the Association for the Advancement of the Blind and Retarded, fits into the neighborhood just like every other house on the street.

"I have no complaints," said

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Jeff Cavagmaro, who lives three doors away. "They haven't been a problem."

Christopher Vetri, who lives two doors away, can attest to the fact that property values did not fall on the block, because he bought his home after the agency moved in.

"I have no opposition to it," Vetri said after living in the neighborhood for seven years. "It probably added to the neighborhood, considering the shape this house was in when I bought it."

Some neighbors are even more enthusiastic about the home.

"It's a terrific experience," said Stephanie LaForte, who lives across the street, about four houses down. "I'm glad they won the lawsuit."

Bernard Kosinski, president of the Dongan Hills United Civic Association, which filed the lawsuit, said he has heard no complaints since the home opened.

"I went to court against that group home. But now it's a different story," Kosinski said. "Since then, they couldn't be nicer neighbors."

Most residents of group homes are there permanently. Therefore, the grounds must always be clean and well-groomed, said Arthur Palevsky, executive director of the Brooklyn-based Independent Living Agency, which operates Project Hope. Since all group homes are targets of intense controversy, he said all complaints are taken to heart.

"We take things very seriously," he said. "There's no such thing as a minor issue. We won't argue with people — we'll take them at their word."

The residents are bused to work programs, schools or different programs where they learn personal hygiene and/or social and vocational skills.

"The point is not to keep them in the house all day long," said Freda McDuffie, the house manager of Project Hope. "No one really hangs around. There's always something for them to learn. So there's never a dull moment."

Although there haven't been any written complaints, some Hope Avenue residents still oppose the home.

Out of nine neighbors interviewed, three still opposed the group home, while the remainder said it did not negatively impact the neighborhood. Many residents, however, complained about the traffic increase and employees who yell or beep their horns early

in the morning. One neighbor, who requested anonymity, said a fire alarm goes off in the house at least twice a week. One resident, he added, has run away from the house at least three times. Other neighbors said they have heard screams coming from the house late at night and early in the morning.

"I was opposed to it at first. Now I'm more opposed," said another neighbor, who would not give his name. "You sit here in the back yard, and you hear blood-curdling screams. To me it's destroyed our block."

"I feel they have to have a place," he added, "but why couldn't they put (the home) where their parents live? I'm not angry at the residents. I'm just angry at the people who put them there."

Except for the increase in traffic, Palevsky said he had not heard those complaints. What might seem strange to some people, such as the odd voices and occasional screams, might not faze the employees.

In response to the runaway, Palevsky said he knew of one incident over the summer in which a person wandered out of the yard, but was brought back within 20 seconds. He said he hopes that neighbors with complaints will contact his office.

Most of the neighbors said they are sympathetic toward the mentally retarded and are willing to develop the patience and understanding it takes to accept them into the neighborhood.

"You hear some screaming every now and then, but it only lasts a minute," said Danny Gunn, who has lived on Hope Avenue for two years. "But we really don't have any problems. Before, it was an old, abandoned house. It was an eyesore."

"These kids don't bother anybody," said Ben Panzella, who has lived on the street for 40 years. "Half the time, you don't know they exist."

Eileen Ford knew the group home existed when she bought a townhouse across the street. So far, she said, she has no regrets.

"As long as they're not criminals, I don't care," she said as her two young children played on the street in front of Project Hope. "I feel they're being taken care of."

*Third in a series. Tomorrow: "The most difficult thing that parents can do is place their children with strangers and depend on strangers to care for them."*

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