



Melissa Calman talks with Gene Spatz, director of On Your Mark, at the group home at 71 DeKay St. in West Brighton.

ADVANCE PHOTOS/HILTON FLORES

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# Residents of a group home live like any other big family

## Same dreams and same problems

By EILEEN AJ CONNELLY  
ADVANCE STAFF WRITER

The young men and women who live at 71 DeKay St., West Brighton, have a hard time agreeing on what radio station to keep the living room stereo tuned to.

The four men and six women can't agree on whether to watch MTV or VH-1 either. They tend to bicker about issues like this, much the way brothers and sisters do.

Like most people between the ages of 18 and 23, these people are happy to have moved away from their parents and into a place of their own. They also all happen to have developmental disabilities and live in a group home.

"We're like everyone else in the neighborhood," said Donald McCarthy, 18. "We work, we go to school, we play sports." Donald is

one of the people who lives at this community residence run by On Your Mark, a West Brighton-based agency that provides residential, recreational and educational services for people with developmental disabilities.

The housemates are aware that their neighborhood did not welcome the news that they would be moving in. "I think most of us have faced prejudice all our lives," Donald said.

But prejudice is not what is on the minds of this group. They are too busy living their lives: preparing for graduations and proms, going to work or looking for jobs, learning the skills that will help them become even more independent, and finding time for sports and other social activities.

A recent evening visit provided a glimpse of what life is like on DeKay Street. The house stands on a corner of the quiet, tree-lined avenue, and from the outside there is no way to tell that this home is different from any of the others on the block.

Donald and his roommate, Anthony Fairweather, 18, offered a tour of the house. Two of the women have their own bedrooms, the rest of the residents share rooms with one other person.

A giant poster of the pop singer Michael Bolton hangs on the wall in the room shared by Lynn Gregoli, 21, and Samantha Rothman, 22. Melissa Calman, 20,

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and Susan Castellano, 21, prefer to decorate their space with pictures of their families. Personal items are scattered through 20-year-old Joyce Scimeca's room, highlighted by her VCR and collection of soap-opera tapes.

The men's rooms are filled with medals and trophies from sporting events, photos and other personal items.

As the residents come home in the afternoon from their jobs and school, they check the list of chores to see who has to help the staff prepare dinner, and who must set the table, do the laundry or perform other household tasks.

The 24-hour staff maintains the household schedules, does the food shopping and the majority of the cooking, and helps shuttle the housemates around the Island. They are also there to provide support and instruction to the residents, many of whom are living away from their parents or others who cared for them, for the first time.

Anthony said he has learned how to do things for himself since the house opened in March. "I was lazy when I lived at home," he said.

Samantha said she likes the company her housemates provide. Her brother and sister no longer live with her parents, and it was lonely at home. There is always someone around at the community residence. "It's nice, like family," she said.

The housemates have some free time before their meal, which is served family-style in the dining room. Lynn is upstairs in her room, listening to some music. Joyce decides to help peel potatoes for the evening meal, even though it isn't her turn to help make dinner.

Stacy Panzica, who celebrated her 23rd birthday Friday, said the thing she misses the most since moving in is her three cats. Several of the other housemates had pets at their parents' homes and would like to have one together.

Mark Miraldi, 21, doesn't like

the idea of getting a pet because he said his new housemates are enough company for now.

When a staff member calls them to dinner, the residents quickly fill the seats around the table and start serving themselves. The chatter around the table randomly shifts from plans for proms to the excitement over

going to Ithaca for the statewide Special Olympics over the weekend. They notice that one housemate, John Glotzer, 18, is not home, and explain that he is at his job at Waldbaum's supermarket, New Springville.

As soon as dinner ends, the activity begins again. Donald has to catch a bus and go to work, Anthony is due at a recreational program. Melissa wants to go to the Staten Island Mall to buy her parents an anniversary present, and Susan and Lynn decide to join her for a shopping expedition. Stacy, Mark and Joyce still have chores to finish, and Samantha, tired after a long day, wants to stay home and rest. Within a few minutes, the dining room table is cleared, the dishes are being done and the housemates are off to their respective destinations.

They said they enjoy learning things such as household chores and money management. Someday each would like to have the chance to live in an even more independent environment, perhaps an apartment where they would be visited weekly by a case manager, rather than have 24-hour supervision.

But that's down the road: They still have a lot of learning to do at their current home. "That's a big step," Stacy said.

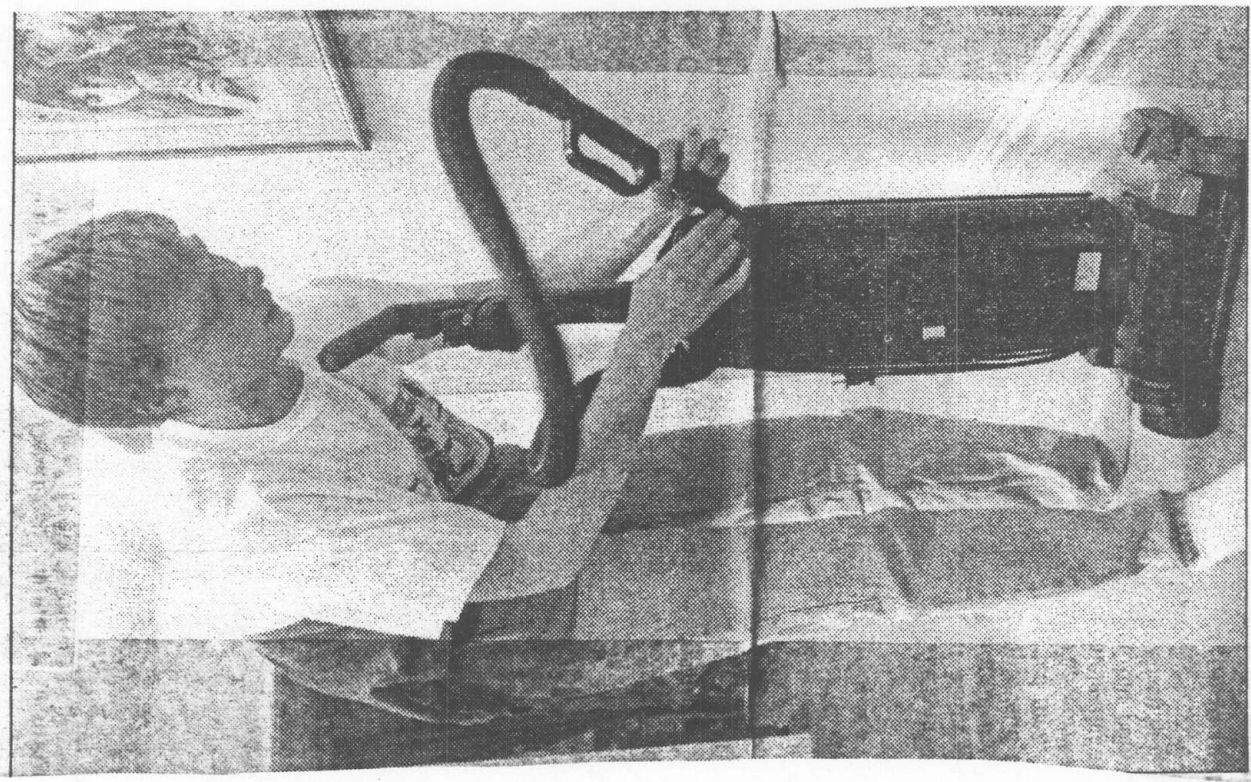
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to shop



From left, Joyce Scimeca, Kathy Denmark and Terence Hudson help to get dinner ready at the group home in West Brighton.



Mark Miraldi, a resident of a group home in West Brighton, hauls out the vacuum cleaner to do some household maintenance.



**Donald McCarthy cuts up some spuds for dinner at the group home where he is a resident.**

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**Susan Castellano prepares a salad for herself and other residents of her home in West Brighton.**

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