

New mission at The Mount

- Ending contracts with city agency
- Shifting focus to disabled, other programs

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The Mission of the Immaculate Virgin, Mount Loretto, is ending its 111-year tradition of providing refuge to New York City's orphaned, abandoned and abused children.

Father John C. Drumgoole's legacy of helping children will not be forsaken, however. The New York Archdiocese-controlled facility plans to shift its focus to new educational and recreational programs for all Staten Island kids and the opening of more campus residences for developmentally disabled children, adolescents and young adults.

"We will no longer be caring for the abandoned, dependent or neglected children of the city of New York," said Michael Drespel, who was named Mount Loretto's acting executive director in June. "We will be serving children in a different way. It's a new beginning. It's so important for people to know that we're going to continue to be there."

"We don't see this as an end to the agency," said Dr. John Brennan, president of the board of trustees. "We feel it is better for the youngsters and the community that we change our focus. It was not an easy decision."

The board's decision came after months of discussions among Mount Loretto administrators, the Archdiocese of New York, child welfare officials, the Board of Education, the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities (OMRDD) and Borough Hall, Drespel said.

In a statement given to employees this morning, the board announced it had "decided to discontinue all of its Child Welfare Administration (CWA) programs under an orderly phase-out schedule."

Mount Loretto is currently contracted by the city and state to place 350 adolescents — referred by courts, child welfare agencies and families — in cottages on its 360-acre Pleasant Plains campus or in community-based foster, adoptive and group homes.

There are presently 101 young people living on campus under CWA contracts, 190 children in the foster boarding program and 67 adolescents in nine group homes scattered around the Island, Drespel said.

Under the new plan the Mission will no longer accept CWA referrals when its current contract expires July 1, 1995, Drespel said.

Management of the group and foster homes will shift to the CWA and its remaining social-services contractors, Drespel said. The location of the off-campus homes will remain the same.

The cottages on Mount Loretto grounds will be emptied for use by disabled clients, with current non-disabled residents gradually being placed in other programs.

Drespel said he envisions about 80 people referred by OMRDD living in small apartments on

campus by 1996. Currently there are 16 OMRDD residents on campus.

"We're going to move cautiously and sensitively on how we turn the place around so that children and their families are not adversely affected," Drespel said.

The trustees' decision represents a brave new world for "The Mount," which was established by Father Drumgoole in 1883 as a boys' orphanage. Even as the campus evolved from pastureland where 1,500 orphans grew food, raised livestock and made their own shoes to the highly specialized social-services center it is today, its primary mission to provide shelter for needy children remained intact.

Faced with dwindling referrals and the financial drain of maintaining a huge campus, Mount Loretto leaders said they felt the need to change course.

"The buildings are large, congestate-care buildings; they're old and they need a lot of renovation," Drespel said. "Hand in glove with that is the number of referrals are down. It's difficult to maintain a program if you don't have the oil that's going to turn the wheel. The less children we have, the less income we have."

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