

A MOTHER SPEAKS OUT AGAINST COMMUNITY OPPOSITION



LAURA BRUNO ABOUT STATEN ISLAND

Elizabeth Caminiti couldn't quite keep up with the other kids trick-or-treating around their Great Kills block last Monday, but that didn't stop her huge brown eyes from beaming. Clutching her goody bag, the cherubic 5½-year-old in the black-and-white-spotted-cow costume smiled.

"How does the cow go?" prompted her mother Anne Marie.

"Mmmmm!!!"

"Right!" Mrs. Caminiti said, explaining, "That's how Lizzie says 'Moo.'"

Lizzie does a lot of things in her own special way. She is mentally retarded with orthopedic problems — categorizations that do not inhibit her shining personality. On Halloween in particular, she was just another kid, a precious child eliciting coo-

ing remarks from neighbors.

But when Elizabeth grows up, if she needs to live in a supervised group home for people with developmental disabilities, will she be so welcome in the neighborhood?

Mrs. Caminiti has reason to believe her daughter would be shunned, taunted, and blamed for reducing property values.

A few weeks ago, Mrs. Caminiti was busy with PTA responsibilities at her son Christopher's school, PS 34, the night that 100 Great Kills residents angrily protested a planned

group home for the community. They spoke out at a Community Board 3 committee meeting on the home proposed by the Staten Island Developmental Disabilities Services Office, the borough arm of the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities.

The Armstrong Avenue residence, which gained Board 3 approval, is to house eight developmentally disabled adults ages 21 to 40.

Though she hadn't attended the meeting, (See MOTHER, Page A 4)

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Mrs. Caminiti spoke to friends who had, and she read the front-page news story that appeared the next day in the Advance.

"When I saw the article, I was just absolutely devastated and shocked," Mrs. Caminiti said.

Putting pen to spiral-notebook paper, she voiced her own protest.

"The people of Great Kills never cease to amaze me," she wrote to the Advance's "Your opinion" column. "We live in a neighborhood covered in graffiti.

The public school my son attends is slowly being destroyed by young people hanging out on weekends, evenings and daytime.

These boys (yes boys, under 21) and girls openly drink alcohol and use disgusting foul language while my son is being dismissed at 3 p.m. However, these young people are not developmentally disabled between the ages of 21 and 40.

"They are 'normal' able-bodied Great Kills citizens. So please tell me where are these angry neighbors who so violently and openly oppose an adult group home when their children are destroying my neighborhood?" she asked in the letter.

"I didn't have to read the article or attend the meeting to know how people in this neighborhood feel

about the disabled," Mrs. Caminiti said.

On numerous occasions, when Elizabeth would arrive home from preschool in her bus, residents would pass the bus despite the fact that its red lights were flashing, or they would honk because Elizabeth was slow crossing the street, her mother said.

"Everyone is entitled to their own feelings," Mrs. Caminiti said, "but people also have to be able to advocate for the disabled."

Attitudes of unacceptance toward people with developmental disabilities make her think society is stepping backward.

She was particularly disturbed to read that Great Kills residents predicted the group home residents would be taunted by area teen-agers.

"Where do teen-agers learn to make fun of retarded people?" Mrs. Caminiti said rhetorically. "Ignorance breeds hatred and hatred breeds violence, and that's what's happening in this neighborhood. People, especially young people — teens and pre-teens — are not taught to respect their developmentally disabled peers."

Nor does she comprehend the property-value argument. "I don't understand how these eight people are going to lower property val-

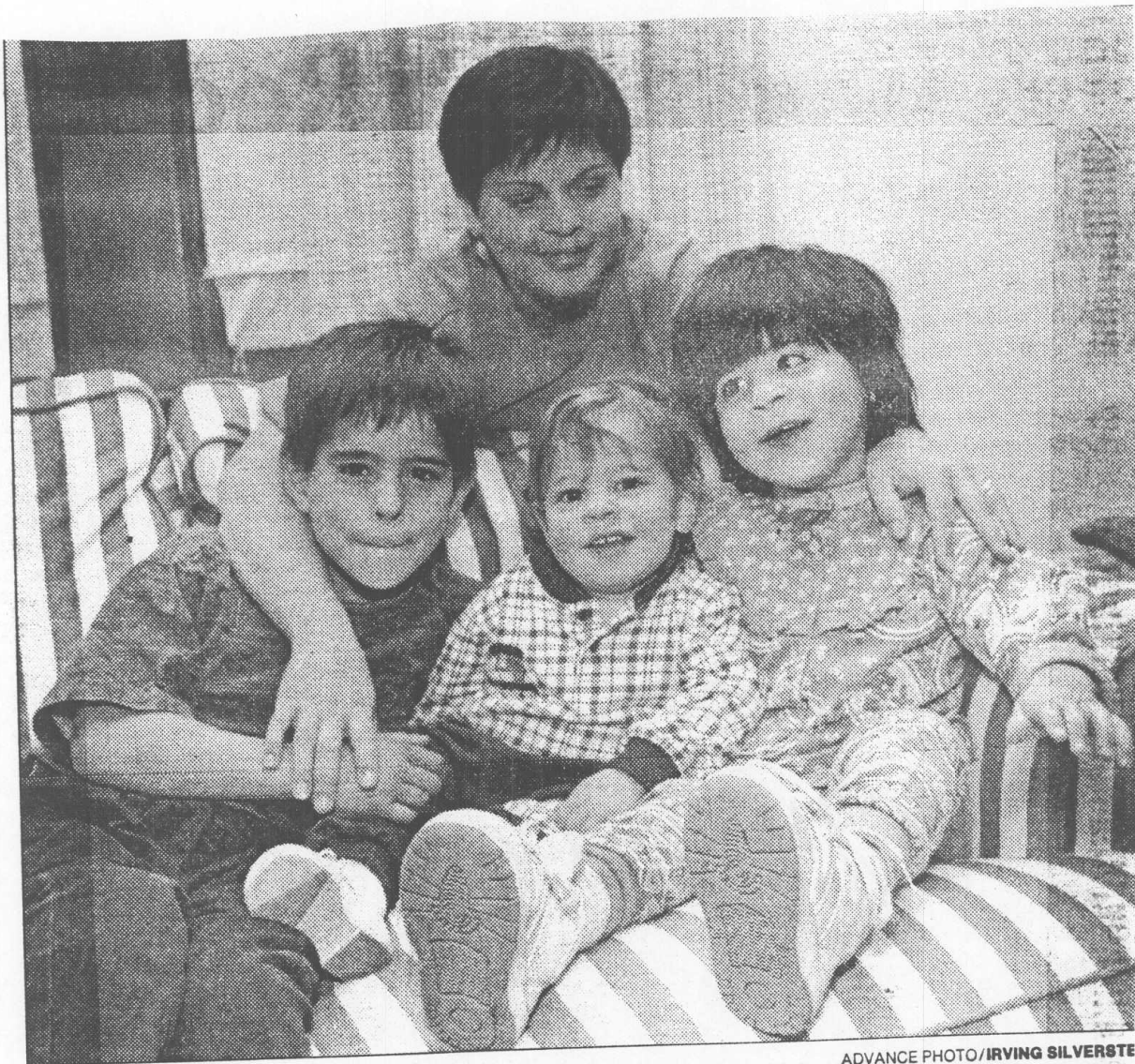
ues. They're going to have constant supervision, they go to day programs and there will be a worker there at night. They're not going to be sitting on their front lawn smoking and drinking and cursing. They're not going to be molesting children," she said.

After learning about the protest meeting, Mrs. Caminiti and a friend who also has a developmentally disabled child, were together in the PS 32 school yard, "sobbing to think that our two daughters are looked on as deviants," she said.

"Nobody is exempt from having a retarded child. If you start early enough with intervention, disabled people can definitely be worked into society just like quote 'normal' people," she said.

"Developmentally disabled men and women do not destroy their own or other people's property. They don't steal cars or deal drugs. They don't break beer bottles or tear down basketball hoops in the PS 32 school yard," Mrs. Caminiti wrote the Advance. "I hope that my beautiful daughter Elizabeth, who has taught me and everyone who knows her the meaning of love, will never have an effect on the real estate value of a home."

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ADVANCE PHOTO/IRVING SILVERSTE

Anne Marie Caminiti puts her arms around her three children — Christopher, Salvatore and Elizabeth, left to right.

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