

In 1992, the Board of Education adopted an inclusion policy for District 75, the citywide district for severely disabled children. At Mrs. Goepel's request, Laura Towey, the inclusion facilitator on Staten Island, began searching for a school that would register Jackie.

Meanwhile, a committee on special education refused to recommend Jackie for inclusion. But Mrs. Goepel countered by refusing to sign papers keeping her at PS 37.

"I was on a mission," she said.

Poised to sue the Board of Education, Mrs. Goepel subpoenaed top administrators in the system. A day before the impartial hearing, her phone rang.

"Guess what? We found a school!" Mrs. Towey told her. PS 52 principal Rosemarie Varriano and teacher Blanche Tate agreed to take Jackie into a fourth-grade class with other children her own age.

No one expected that Jackie would master the three Rs, but Mrs. Goepel hoped that Jackie would reap the social benefits of being around "normal" children.

Never learned to share

"Jackie had never learned how to share," said Mrs. Goepel. "She would finish all her french fries, wheel herself over to you and take yours."

Mrs. Tate introduced the thin girl whose face is framed with straight brown hair to a group of curious children. "She came in the first day and we saw her in the library. At first we thought she was grabby," said Stephanie Strumolo, a classmate.

Para-professional Lisa Marino was hired to look after Jackie, whose wide desk abutted Mrs. Tate's and pressed against Stephanie's. "She was shy and she would cry in class," Stephanie said.

Some mocking children imitated the awkward way Jackie moved her hands, said Stephanie.

Then Jackie started to shout out and grunt in class. To Mrs. Tate, the sounds were full of hope. "Her intonation is like a child learning to speak."

Mrs. Tate answered the sounds with a cheerful, "And what else do you have to say?"

Students put an end to some of Jackie's anti-social behaviors, including grabbing things that didn't belong to her.

"When she puts things in her mouth, we tell her that it's not-

When Mrs. Tate asks for a volunteer to help Jackie, 20 hands shoot up. Last month, Jackie wheeled herself to the door but couldn't manipulate the locks. The next day, Matthew Peru gave her a chain and slide lock mounted on a block of wood. "My father made it for me when I was a kid," said Matthew, sliding the lock in the hopes of grabbing Jackie's attention.

Sachaline described Jackie as "funny," "friendly" and "nice" but said Jackie isn't spared the taunts of some children. "When she tries to say an easy word and she can't, they make fun of her."

Mrs. Tate includes Jackie in everything, even class trips. During a lesson on the food chain, Mrs. Tate assigned each child a role. A string stretched across the room connecting Jackie, a mouse, to her predator, a bobcat. Before the room became a web of string, Jackie lost patience and wheeled herself toward the door.

Mrs. Tate interrupted the lesson and spoke in a firm voice, without anger. "Stop it right now. You're not going anywhere," she said, driving a broom handle between the spokes of Jackie's wheelchair.

Jackie's grunted protests gave in to the urgings of children who distracted her.

Moved to regular desk

During an afternoon coloring session, Mrs. Marino lifted an excited Jackie from her wheelchair and moved her to a regular desk. But when Mrs. Marino tried to return Jackie to the wheelchair, the 10-year-old fiercely resisted. She jackknifed her body, arched her back in defiance, and screamed.

Mrs. Marino pressed down on Jackie's belly, and strapped her brown leather boots into the foot pedals of the wheelchair. Mrs. Tate rubbed Jackie's head to quiet her sobs. "You want to stay up but ... I know it's hard to go back into the wheelchair," she said, kissing her forehead. "Your little heart is racing."

Mrs. Tate turned away from Jackie with tears in her eyes. "It breaks your heart," she said.

For the Goepels, inclusion has been a heart-warming experience, and their biggest gift to Jackie. "Jackie has taught me more things than I could ever teach her. Whatever her stay on earth is, I'll know she was happy and had opportunities and that's what counts," said Mrs. Goepel.