

A Very Special Place has helped hundreds of developmentally

disabled Island adults in its first 20 years

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“We don't go to Atlantic City, so we bring the casinos here,” joked Alan Roff, program director at the Senior Care and Activity Center of A Very Special Place Inc., as he described some of the activities available at the center for developmentally disabled adults.

What is even more interesting to observers of the Ocean Breeze activity center, which is designed to meet the leisure needs of senior citizens with developmental disabilities, is that the center is but one of a myriad of services introduced by A Very Special Place for its Staten Island clientele over the past 20 years.

The agency offers an extensive menu of offerings to developmentally disabled adults, helping them to enjoy their lives and gain employment wherever possible.

At the senior activity center, clients enjoy courses in dance, exercise, board and card games, crafts, gardening, cooking and music appreciation.

“Consumer choices, as well as further development of their leadership potential, is encouraged in the senior program,” said Maureen Brennick, director of the agency's family support services. “The program has the flexibility to stay dynamic and innovative in order to be responsive to the changing needs of the participants,” said Ms. Brennick. Currently there are about 60 in the program.

Now based in Dongan Hills, A Very Special Place will mark its 20th anniversary with a luncheon next Wednesday at noon in the Monte

Bianco, Grant City.

The agency is dedicating its celebration to “the special blend of consumers, families, staff and friends who for more than two decades have inspired the caring atmosphere and quality services that improve and enhance the lives of the people who utilize them.”

Currently, close to 900 individuals participate in the agency's programs.

In addition to the Senior Care and Activity Center, the service menu offered by a Very Special Place includes the New Dorp Day Treatment Center, the Great Kills Day Treatment Center, the Community Center, also in Ocean Breeze, residential services in the Benton Residence in Dongan Hills and the Hylan Residence in Grasmere, in addition to supported community residences for seven individuals.

Not to be overlooked are the agency's outreach services, including case management and individual and family support services for 100 people.

A Very Special Place was founded in 1974 by a handful of people who wanted to provide an alternative and more comprehensive source of programs and services for Staten Island adults with developmental disabilities.

All of the founders are still on the staff or serving on the agency's board of directors, according to Elaine Auerbach, director of development.

Among the pioneers are former Willowbrook State School employees Genevieve R. Benoit, now executive director of A Very Special Place, and Diane M. Buglioli, associate executive director, in addition to board member Susan Montella. The current board president is Sonia Braniff.

Until 1980, the organization acted as an advocacy and referral service through its mem-

bership in the Staten Island Regional Board on Retardation and Disabilities Council.

In April of that year, A Very Special Place opened its first day treatment center, with 12 clients at the New Dorp site.

In the ensuing years, the agency continued to meet the changing needs of people with developmental disabilities, noted Ms. Buglioli.

The agency's two day-treatment centers provide clinical and therapeutic services to more than 100 adults.

Both the New Dorp and Great Kills centers offer evaluation, pre-vocational training in work skills, and rehabilitative skills in self care, dressing for work, community awareness and leisure skills to people over the age of 21 who are developmentally disabled.

In the pre-vocational training program, clients learn basic work skills needed to perform in a sheltered workshop setting, such as identifying numbers and sorting and assembling objects.

In the personal management program, clients are taught grooming skills and basic food preparation.

The centers also encourage as much recreational therapy as possible. The exercise bike is one of their most popular items. Cheery and friendly, clients reflect the general ambience of the center with a friendly greeting and a hearty handshake for visitors.

Medical, nursing, psychological and case management service are also available, according to Mrs. Auerbach.

A Very Special Place also sponsors a supported work program called “Employment Training Alternatives (ETA)” which provides individuals, age 18 and over, with a developmental or learning disability, the opportunity to receive voca-

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