

# Home sweet group home

■ Residents find their group home offers them a place to learn, live and grow

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They have been roommates for only two years, but they have lived with developmental disabilities all their lives.

For Joe Thomas, Wendy Cogan and Jim Gordon, being disabled means living together in a co-ed group home in New Dorp with seven other disabled men and women between the ages of 21 and 42.

But they don't mind. To them, it's not the stereotypi-

cal "group home" that is feared — and fought — by neighbors.

The two-story dwelling on Amboy Road is their home away from home — a place where they learn life skills to help them master the art of independent living.

"I like my friends," Jim said while setting the dining room table for dinner with housemate Meryl Moskowitz.

Cooking dinner, setting the table, cleaning and gardening are just some of the chores the residents learn from care providers who work at the home around the clock.

These chores help give clients a sense of independence and accomplishment, according to house manager Cynthia Kirkwood.

"We try to promote a home-like environment and normalize it as much as possible. We promote independence," said Mrs. Kirkwood, who works for Community Resources for the Developmen-

## GOOD NEIGHBOR POLICY

THIRD IN A FOUR-PART SERIES

tally Disabled (CRDD), a not-for-profit agency that runs a total of seven group homes on the Island.

For the most part CRDD's clients who come from institutions such as Staten Island Developmental Center (SIDC), Willowbrook, have made a successful transition into group-home living.

But sometimes getting clients to adjust to living in a community-based environment isn't easy, said Barbara Mercado, the direc-

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Staff member Maria Crespo looks on as resident Adrienne Biviano shows off her newly acquired ironing skills.



of program services for CRDD. The staff uses special sensitivity techniques, such as attentiveness and compassion, to help the clients make the proper adjustment.

CRDD also operates intermediate care facilities for clients who require assistance with everyday skills, like brushing their teeth and getting dressed. Independence is acquired little by little every day. Clients get personal satisfaction in many ways, such as doing chores like laundry, decorating their rooms or using public transportation to get to and from part-time jobs.

Just like other big families, clients argue over whose turn it is to set the table or do the dishes. And like teen-agers, they have their share of problems with friends and sweethearts, Mrs. Kirkwood said.

"We try to give them the most individual choices we can. We teach responsibility and try not to infringe on that," said Ms. Mercado.

For instance, rather than attend a workshop, Jim chose to work as a messenger and Joe as a maintenance worker for CRDD. Joe, a computer buff, is also enrolled in a computer class at the College of Staten Island and is looking forward to getting his driver's license.

After 1½ years, the home on Amboy Road is running smoothly, according to Mrs. Kirkwood.

"It's like one big happy family," she said.

### Fear fuels opposition

Fortunately for CRDD the group homes have "merged nicely" with the homeowners in the seven North and South Shore communities where the agency's facilities are in operation, according to CRDD staff.

"Community opposition is involved in each home, but a good

pre-plan" can help alleviate neighbors' apprehensions and fears, Ms. Mercado said.

Pre-planning involves proposing the idea to the community board in the area and then going door to door, talking to neighbors.

Fear and confusion about the clients' mental state and the operation of the home are the key reasons for residents' resistance, she said.

"It's tough for people to accept, but if you're a good neighbor, people will accept you," Ms. Mercado said.

Ms. Kirkwood said when the home on Amboy Road opened, the clients got together and baked cookies for their neighbors. The neighbors were receptive to the gesture, she said.

But facilities that cater to disabled people can meet with resistance if residents are unfamiliar with the agency running it or have no prior experience with group homes.

Since the court order to phase out the SIDC in Willowbrook was signed in the late 1980s, group homes for the disabled have popped up in many Island communities.

And the controversy over the siting of group homes also has grown. It's rare that a home is proposed without a community protest.

At public meetings where opposition is expressed about a service for mentally or physically disabled clients, the most common concerns are that the group home will devalue property and threaten the safety of neighborhood children.

That's far from the truth, according to some people living near group homes.

"They're wonderful neighbors, and the people who work there are so nice," said Deborah Monplaisir, who lives near a United Cerebral Palsy (UCP) group home on Madsen Avenue in

As far as people go, they're people like anybody else, they have feelings, and they have just a little more needs than those of us who can walk on two feet," she said, noting that she lets her five children, who range in age from 3 to 10, visit with the residents who have mental and physical disabilities.

Ms. Monplaisir said the house is kept "immaculate and the yard is kept well. There is nothing there to devalue property."

Alice Siviglia, who lives near a new UCP group home on Sharrotts Road in Charleston, agreed.

"I welcome them. I wish they were my next-door neighbors. They're very nice, the people are delightful," she said.

If a problem arises within the community about how a group home is run, every state or private agency catering to the developmentally disabled has a community advisory board, said Ron Byrne, spokesman for the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities (OMRDD).

"I believe without any question, group homes throughout Staten Island and the state of New York can live in the community and be good neighbors," Byrne said.

He said if people report problems with group homes, OMRDD will investigate.

Sometimes neighbors are under the mistaken impression that the group home residents will be mentally ill rather than mentally disabled.

A person is labeled mentally disabled if his or her emotional development is slower than the norm. A mental illness is a psychological disorder.

Neighbors also often feel that, while group homes are needed, their neighborhood has become oversaturated with such services. Community opposition also stems from unfamiliarity.

"It's a fear of the unknown," said Joseph Carr, district manager of Community Board 1. Louis Caravone, chairman of Board 2, said the state should establish a list of the different types of group homes.

"People tend to lump all group homes together, and this is unfair to the worthwhile programs," Caravone said.

Said Ms. Mercado of CRDD, "There is fear no matter how much you educate people... it doesn't hit home until it actually affects them personally."

Jacqueline Rumolo, director of community affairs and community support services for UCP, said people also oppose group homes because, "They're afraid homes aren't supervised, and they fear workers from other neighborhoods."

In the case of group homes for disabled people, much of that fear evaporates after the facility is opened.

For instance, A Very Special Place faced fierce opposition in 1992 when it proposed a group home for 10 mentally and developmentally disabled adults at 70 Benton Ave., Dongan Hills. At one Community Board 2 meeting, residents accused the board and A Very Special Place of "steamrolling" their concerns, and several walked out.

Bernard Kosinski, a Dongan Hills resident and board member at the time, said at that meeting that the area was too congested with social services to accept another group home. Now, three years later, he says there hasn't been a problem with the facility.

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**Moratorium on group homes**  
 Pataki's budget proposal calls for a moratorium on all community-based residences, including group homes for the developmentally disabled.

While this won't affect any group homes currently in operation or those being readied for occupancy, it will prohibit all new construction, said Byrne of OMRDD.

In fact, a recent proposal by the Center for Family Support to operate a group home in an Annandale townhouse likely will be turned down by the state.

Byrne said the group home planned for 12 Challenger Dr. for three developmentally disabled women is not included in Pataki's proposed budget.

The state will continue to provide family support services for the developmentally disabled through its many programs, Byrne said. People won't be totally locked out of group homes. As vacancies open, he said, people will be placed. But the waiting list for people waiting for placement is a long one, he said.

*Tomorrow: The Island's homeless situation.*

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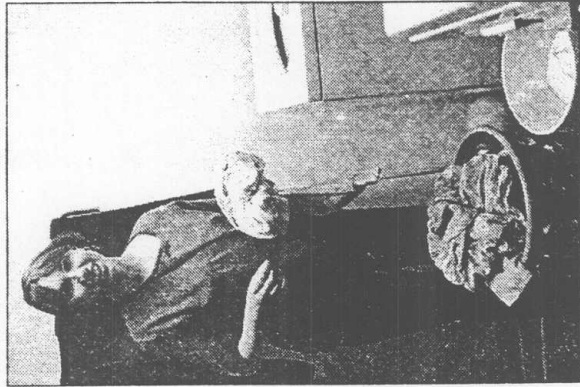
ADVANCE PHOTO ■ JAN SOMMA

Staff members and residents gather for dinner in the Great Kills group home. From left are staffer Maria Crespo; resident, Wendy Cogan; staff member, Tito Cruz; and residents Jim Gordon, Joseph Thomas, Adrienne Biviano and Meryl Moskowitz.

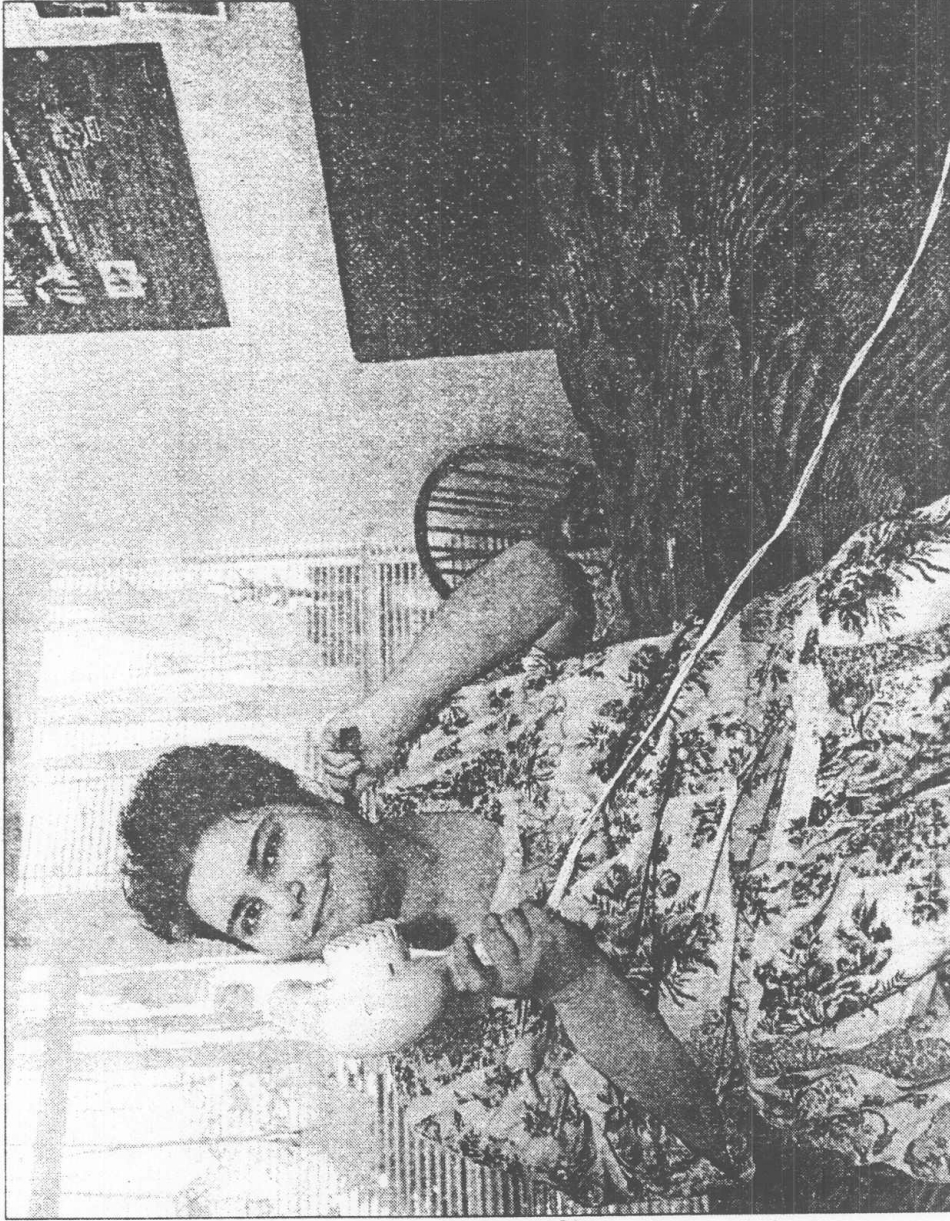


ADVANCE PHOTO ■ JAN SOMMA

Cynthia Kirkwood, manager of the group home, left, plays a board game with residents Joseph Thomas and Meryl Moskowitz.



ADVANCE PHOTO ■ JAN SOMMA  
Group home resident  
Adrienne Biviano sorts  
laundry.



ADVANCE PHOTO ■ MIKE FALCO

Wendy Cogan, a resident of the Great Kills group home, dries her hair.

# Some favor big institutions

■ They argue that the Willowbrook State School did not have to close despite its notorious problems

BY TRACEY PORPORA  
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The Staten Island Developmental Center, which under the name the Willowbrook State School became known as a snakepit of abuse and neglect, closed seven years ago. Now some residents want to reopen it.

Behind the walls that now house part of the Island's largest educational complex, the College of Staten Island's Willowbrook campus, was once an institution where nearly 6,000 residents lived each day in pain and fear.

In the 1970s the Advance uncovered tales of overcrowded wards, children wandering around half naked and starving, and young men forced to sleep, eat and defecate in a single concrete room.

While most people agree the neglect and poor treatment of Willowbrook's developmentally disabled residents was unacceptable, community activists like Lorraine Sorge and Joe Valentin, of the Staten Island Taxpayers'

Association, say the facility, if run properly, could have worked.

Instead of closing it down, the state should have addressed the problems and kept the center's doors open, they said.

"Whatever happened, they should have monitored better. But they didn't have to shut it down," said Valentin.

"Now [we] have no control. When it was open, we had more control of them [the developmentally disabled]; we knew who they were. We only had one or two escape, but that was it. Now we have them in the street, mingling with people," he said.

Although Ms. Sorge said she agrees with caring properly for the developmentally disabled, "I believe they never should have closed Willowbrook because they knew the problems and should have corrected them."

"They [Staten Island Developmental Center] handed us this unsolvable problem and left it on the emotions of the parents," she added.

But residents who wish for the return of institutions like the center face opposition among government officials and service providers for the developmentally disabled.

Since the center closed in accord with a court settlement "virtually all" the 5,343 former residents have been placed into homes in the community, said Ron Byrne, spokesman for the state Office of Mental Retardation and

homes, Byrne argued, but they make sense from a fiscal standpoint. More tax dollars are spent on large institutions, which have more overhead, than on group homes, he said.

It costs \$121,000 a year to care for a person in an institution, while an average of \$80,000 is expended to care for an individual in a community-based facility, Byrne said.

CHANGE NY, a state fiscal watchdog group, supports the state's use of not-for-profit group homes over institutions, saying the homes are cost-effective and provide better care. It has studied the state's use of such residential facilities and come to the conclusion that private groups often do the job better than the state itself.

"We think in every instance possible, the state should be moving away from expensive institutions to community-based group homes," said Brian Backstrom, acting president of the statewide organization. "And we have been seeing an increase in that direction, but it's moving very slowly away from institutions."

Backstrom said he thought people who preferred the institutions to group homes probably weren't well-informed about the fiscal effects of such a policy and the impact it would have on client care.

"There's some NIMBY [Not In My Backyard] syndrome there, too," he said.

*When it [Willowbrook State School] was open, we had more control of them; we knew who they were. We only had one or two escape, but that was it. Now we have them in the street, mingling with people.*

Joe Valentin

Developmental Disabilities (OMRDD).

United Cerebral Palsy (UCP) was one of the agencies that helped center residents make the transition from the institution to life on the outside.

"It was literally like the state workers walked out. UCP's mission was to get people out into homes and into the community," said Jacqueline Rumolo, director of community affairs and community support services for the agency. "We were able to place hundreds of people in a few years, in places all over the city."

Not only is care better in group

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