

'Citizen advocates'

Agency appeals for chums for the retarded

By MICHAEL MATUSEWSKI
And you thought it only happens in movies like "Something for the Boys." Henry Styker is 25 years old and mentally retarded. He has been in six hospitals and institutions since he was five. He found a friend, Michael George of Birmingham, three years ago.

The Oakland County Association for Retarded Citizens (OCARC) is trying to make sure the county's retarded have friends such as George. They call it "citizens advocacy." That's a bureaucratic name for friendship.

According to Michael and OCARC coordinator Ellen Castaldini, it's a different kind of friendship. It means more than chumming around and taking in a Friday night movie, they say.

It means being a teacher, a counselor, and a confidant.

Citizen advocacy made its debut in 1970 under the sponsorship of the National Association for Retarded Citizens.

"It's purpose," says Ms. Castaldini, "is to help individuals coming from institutions to live more independently and to help them learn the skills which are more difficult to pick up."

That could include basic living skills, good eating habits, learning to cook a simple meal, cleaning an apartment and even learning to count money and playing sports. She said.

WHAT DOES it take to be an advocate? Michael is asked. "A willingness to always look at someone as an equal," he replies. "It takes patience. That's probably the main ingredient."

New wrinkles found in attitudes on aging

Do you dread growing old? A University of Michigan study indicates it probably won't be as bad as you think. "People of all ages told us that they believed the later years are full of problems," reports John E. Tropman, the research scientist who headed the study.

"But when questioned about their own situation, those over 65 claimed that they personally were pretty well off; it was just the rest of their age group that was in trouble."

While about 10 per cent of those surveyed said that old age was worse than they had expected, 30 per cent said it was better than they expected. "Americans' fear of old age has less to do with years than with powerlessness," Tropman feels. "To many people, 'growing old' means losing control of your life."

The problems that people will face in old age can generally be predicted by the problems they experience in their youth, Tropman says. "If a person has a low-paying job, for example, he is likely to receive little or no pension and low Social Security benefits and his poverty will be perpetuated. If he has not invested in a home during his early years, he will probably be less able to retire."

"Some people feel they cannot afford a medical checkup until they reach the age to be covered by Medicare," Tropman adds. "By this time they may have developed severe or chronic illnesses that could have been avoided through preventive health care."

Tropman said the results of the study show that in general older persons have improved their lot, but he cautions against complacency. "We must not let this obscure the facts that still exist," he says.

MICHAEL, A GRADUATE student at Michigan State University, says he got involved in OCARC's advocacy program because he wanted to "make a contribution."

He met Henry at Pontiac's Hawthorne Center for Vocational Training. Henry—attentive, sometimes shy—now lives in a foster home. His "step-mother" also has nine children of her own to raise.

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