

Retarded now considered good neighbors

By KATIE KERWIN

Talk around the dinner table at 17250 Cornell in Southfield's Magnolia subdivision is of vacation plans, fishing trips, bowling banquets and the day at work.

"They're just like a family," said Mary Wagner, who often shares a meal with the six male residents. "They come home at night and they all have their chores, helping to get dinner, washing dishes or cleaning up after dinner."

Later in the evening, the men may go out for movies, bowling, Bible class or to attend a local coffee house.

Neighbors occasionally stop in for a few minutes to visit. At holidays, many drop by bringing gifts of baked goods and candy.

"They seem like brothers," commented Ruth Griffith, who lives nearby.

There is not much about the house or its residents to attract attention these days. Most neighbors would probably prefer to forget the controversy that surrounded the community house a year ago.

But last spring, purchase of the house for an adult foster care home for retarded adults stirred heated debate in the area. The house was purchased by Community Living Centers Inc. (CLC), a non-profit, Farmington-based organization which runs eight homes for retarded persons in Oakland County.

The Magnolia Civic Association opposed the foster care facility on the grounds that it would hurt Magnolia property values.

But opposition to the homes went deeper than that. Joanne Wasilewski, CLC housing administrator, believes,

"I think it was fear of the unknown," she said. "People frequently use the terms 'mentally ill' and 'mentally retarded' as interchangeable."

"They form a picture of someone totally unacceptable, someone dangerous who will endanger their children," she said. "Usually we find they are more like us than different. And they are probably less dangerous than normal folk."

Acceptance of the situation takes some time, Ms. Wasilewski acknowledged.

"Some people closed their minds. They were not going to bother with us and they looked the other way. But those who took the time to get to know us and how the program works have accepted us, I think."

The men moved into their new home last June. Resentment did not evaporate overnight. Ms. Wagner, CLC executive director, agreed.

Some Magnolia residents watched the house closely for a while, she later learned, but found nothing amiss. "They couldn't find anything to complain about," she said.

Six "trainable retarded" men live at the Cornell Street house. A resident manager, Terry Stefanovich, supervises their activities. All the occupants hold jobs in the community; several work at local restaurants.

Residents contribute from their wages and Social Security and Social Supplemental Income payments for upkeep of the home. CLC social workers are assigned to each resident and an aide comes in on a part-time basis to assist with planning programs and help pick up the men from work. The program is monitored regularly by the state department of social services.

The center has made improvements on the home since its purchase. Ms. Wagner said. Painting and new carpeting was needed, she said. A leaky ceiling has been repaired and additional shelving installed.

The five-bedroom house also bears homey, personal touches from its occupants' past. A portrait of Betty Brandstetter's mother graces the stairway and curtains from Jerry Carley's family hang at the windows. An organ sits in one corner of the living room. It is the possession of resident John Mintine, an accomplished musician.

When the men moved in, neighbors stopped in to welcome them, bringing pies and cakes to the newcomers.

"We had so many baked goods, we couldn't keep them all," Ms. Wagner said.

An open house at Christmas drew a crowd of friendly neighbors, she said. Well-wishers have brought candy and cookies for Christmas, Easter and other holidays.

The next door neighbors had been "very opposed" to the foster home, Ms. Wagner said. "But at Christmas, she came over with cupcakes and said she appreciated us being good neighbors."

The men have also been invited to nearby homes for dinner. Stefanovich said. They have a standing invitation to the Dads' Club dinners at Magnolia Methodist Church on Friday nights, he added. Residents attend church at Magnolia Methodist and St. Beatrice parish.

Stefanovich, Ms. Wagner and Ms. Wasilewski all said they had heard no negative reactions since the men moved into the neighborhood. Summer picnics in the backyard brought out people from nearby homes.

"The neighbor behind us would bring over a watermelon and another would bring over 'Twinkies,'" Stefanovich recalled.

The goodwill gestures went both



After a full day of work, play and socializing, the six men who live at the community house sit down for a "family" meal. Neighbors who now say the men act like brothers earlier opposed the home on

grounds that it wasn't compatible with the residential character of the neighborhood. (Staff photos by Gary Friedman)

ways, too. Community house resident Russell Farmer helped out a neighbor by shoveling snow from the walk while the neighbor was on vacation.

The recent ice storm felled tree branches on the foster home, prompting Magnolia Methodist Church members to lend a hand. The church provided a hoist, and, with some neighbors' help, the branches were removed from the roof.

Acceptance has come gradually, but directors of the Community Living Center are pleased with the progress.

"At first, I had qualms," neighbor Ruth Griffith admitted. "But now I wouldn't mind if they lived next door to me."

'At first I had qualms (about a home for the retarded in the Magnolia neighborhood). But now I wouldn't mind if they lived next door to me.'

— Ruth Griffith, neighbor



Residents take turns doing the house chores and in the preparation of meals. John Mintine (left) and Terry Arthur get the vegetables ready for the dinner table.

THE INSIDE * ANGLE

SOME FARMINGTON HILLS

EMPLOYEES discovered recently that the city can giveth and taketh away almost in the same breath. During the recent power failure, city administrators sent clerks home rather than have them sit in the dark in front of useless electric typewriters and Xerox machines. A nice gesture you say? Makes sense, doesn't it. Employees were told to call in to find out if the city hall would be reopened the next day. It wasn't. Now, the city administrators are telling clerks that they unknowingly took a mandatory sick day during the power failure. Instead of paying them outright, the city that sent its employees home is asking those employees to dip into sick time. Employees received the news through a surprise memo the day they were scheduled to fill out their time cards. Angles figures some employees might have opted to sit in the dark if they knew they were going home on their sick time. It was surprising they were sent home. IA has always suspected that the city frequently allows its employees to sit in the dark.

A SURE SIGN OF SPRING IN

Farmington is appearing once more. Drugstores and restaurants are posting the admonition on their doors: "No barefeet allowed."

PARENTS WHO WANT TO pick up some tips on raising their children and maintaining order at home can attend a lecture by Dr. Sheldon Brenner, a Southfield pediatrician at 7:30 p.m., May 3 in the Farmington Community Library on Twelve Mile Road. Brenner will also speak about questions parents can and should ask their own pediatrician. The discussion is sponsored by the Farmington Education Commission of the Farmington Youth Advisory Council.

SECTION 36 HOMEOWNERS will conduct a special meeting at 7:30 p.m. on April 26 at the Knights of Columbus Hall, 21900 Middlebelt. Election of officers will be discussed.

THE OAKLAND COUNTY Health Division will offer a free immunization clinic in Farmington at the First Methodist Church on Warner and Grand River. Immunizations will be given from 9 a.m. until noon on May 10. Immunizations for measles, German measles, mumps, polio, diphtheria, tetanus and whooping cough are available. A parent or guardian must accompany a child under 18 years of age and bring any previous records of immunizations.

WHERE DID I COME FROM? is a question that's not limited to curious children. Adults who want that question answered can attend a meeting of the Detroit Society for Genealogical Research to help them trace their family background.

The society will see a slide show and lecture presentation on tombstones and burials at 2 p.m., May 12, in the Explorer's Room of the Detroit Public Library, 5201 Woodward. Mary Jane Trout of the Michigan State Library will lecture.

CHEAP GAS isn't all that bad if you do a little homework, according to Thomas Burkhardt, Michigan State University associate professor of agricultural engineering. Most gas stations buy their gasoline from the same major manufacturer. The primary factor to consider is the octane rating of the gasoline, which is listed on the pump, according to Burkhardt. As long as the octane rating is the same or higher than that recommended in your automobile owner's manual, it's safe to use, Burkhardt says. Using a gasoline with a lower than specified octane rating will cause "spark knock" when the fuel explodes instead of burning in the combustion chamber.

The impact of the newly introduced gasohol fuel (90 percent gasoline and 10 percent grain alcohol) is still forthcoming, according to Burkhardt. But some of the advantages seen by the professor include a higher octane rating because some of the alcohol added and the possibility of increased markets for agricultural products to make the alcohol and reduced gasoline use. (IA figures the grain alcohol is better off in the fuel than in the driver.)

THE RED CROSS is sponsoring safety instruction for persons 17 years old and older from June 16-24 at Camp Storer in Jackson, Mich. Emergency first aid techniques, swimming for the handicapped, cardiopulmonary resuscitation, small craft handling and safe swimming techniques will be taught. Room, board and textbooks cost \$118. Enrollment is limited and applications are taken on a first come first serve basis. Call the safety services department at your local Red Cross office or call 833-4440 to enroll.

DEADLINE

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