

Citizen advocates

New friends come into the lives of the handicapped

By LORAIN McCLISH

Citizen Advocacy is a program devised by Oakland County Association for Retarded Citizens (ARC) which aims to aid any person with a developmental disability.

A citizen advocate is a volunteer who shares friendship and talents with a mentally retarded person who becomes his or her protegee.

Some citizen advocates work on a one-to-one basis. Others work in a group situation.

Testimony that Janet Kielbowicz is doing her job well in Community Living Centers came when a couple of the residents who she sees Wednesday evenings learned they were going to be moving into a new home.

"I knew we were friends, but I didn't realize how much our visits meant to

them. I never suspected there would be such a fuss over promising that we'd see one another again. They made me promise I'd visit at their new home and we'll work that out," she said.

The teenager has been at her volunteer job for about a year and was joined just a few months ago by Fran Redmond to plan the once-a-week get-togethers for residents of Community Living Center's Tuck House.

ELLEN CASTALDINI, citizen advocacy coordinator for Oakland County, calls the advocates "new friends coming into the lives of those who may have not had opportunities to form close friends, to learn through social contacts, or to have their talents and skills stimulated."

Ms. Redmond, a Lathrup Village resident, introduced Bingo for the Wednesday night sessions for lessons in numbers.

Ms. Kielbowicz, a Canton resident and student at Our Lady of Mercy High School, devises craft projects, "generally with paint or clay because those are the things they like most."

It is not unusual, however, for the crafts and games to be put aside "for just talking," Miss Kielbowicz said.

The young volunteer, who is thinking about heading towards a career in special education, learned about citizen advocacy through a speaker who came to her school.

Ms. Redmond, a retired teacher and probably more typical of the advocates, learned about the need for volunteers through the Southfield Eccentric, her local newspaper.

Ms. Redmond had a wide choice of volunteer work offered to her but said of the advocacy program, "This is what I thought I could handle, what I felt comfortable with."

Before that she said, "I didn't have the slightest idea of what the term implied."

MS. CASTALDINI cites the example of a well paid mentally retarded adult who almost lost his utility services because he was never schooled in learning how to pay those bills.

She tells another story of a young woman who almost lost a job over a misunderstanding that would not have occurred if the woman had known how to file a grievance.

She emphasized that situations such as these are not due to a lack of intelligence, but rather a lack of opportunities and experiences in these areas.

Social workers, teachers, family and friends refer mentally retarded individuals who are in need of an advocate friend to the Citizen Advocacy program. Those with epilepsy, cerebral palsy or autism are also assisted.

The advocates come with a belief that they have something to share with a handicapped person who has a difficult time coping within a complex and sometimes unchanging society.

It is Ms. Castaldini's job to match the volunteer to the individual or group needing what she terms "the special friend."



Bingo is on the program for this Wednesday night session planned for residents of Community Living Center's Tuck House by their advocate friends. From left, Melanie Eldred, Kurt Von Grubman, Don Benjamin and Janet Kielbowicz respond to calls by Debrah Raspberry.

Ms. Kielbowicz, a student at Our Lady of Mercy High School, plans the get-togethers with fellow advocate Fran Redmond, not pictured, for the group of eight. (Staff photo by Randy Borst)

BECAUSE THERE is a need for about 100 advocates and only 30 on the job now in the county, Ms. Castaldini creates training programs as the need arises and generally has no more than five in any one class.

The training is specifically geared to the individuals and the job at hand because ARC's philosophy is placing the volunteer and his or her special talents to the need.

The requirements, Ms. Castaldini said, are maturity, creativity and the ability to work independently.

"I can't give close supervision to any of the advocates on the job and I don't want to be there to interfere, so the ability to work independently and respond to whatever is required is important."

"But I am there to give support if support is needed," she said.

However, the friendships that stem between the advocate and the protegee have been such so far that Ms. Castaldini has not received too many calls for help.

"Working with flash cards, some math games, maybe teaching budget-

ing skills, forming discussion groups, sharing of feelings; that is the focus of most of the relationships," she said.

ANY PREVIOUS experience working with the retarded is not necessary. The training sessions help the volunteer to learn to interact on an informal basis and allows the volunteer to decide whether or not she or he wants to become involved in the program before any commitment is made.

Activities are suggested and additional training sessions on special topics are arranged by Ms. Castaldini at the advocate's request.

Full brochures outlining the philosophy and workings of ARC and the advocacy program will be sent by writing Citizen Advocacy Program, Oakland County Association for Retarded Citizens, 690 E. Maple, lower level, Birmingham 48011.

Or, Ms. Castaldini will take inquiries by calling her at 646-4522.

Artist of the month

Bright colors suit her well

By LORAIN McCLISH

The bright colors associated with Mexico are the first to meet the eye in this month's one-woman show in Farmington Hills Community Library.

"The bright colors suit me well," said Gwen Tomkow, artist of the month for May, adding that Mexico is her favorite travel spot.

The south-of-the-border depictions are all realistic paintings rendered in watercolor, but the abstracts she's chosen to display are the clients' favorites, she says.

"They're what I'm commissioned to do most," Mrs. Tomkow said, "and they are the ones that sell the fastest in the shows."

The show in the library this month is the first Mrs. Tomkow has hung "because I've never had enough pieces all together at one time before to be able to do this," she said.

Mrs. Tomkow refers to the art work she is doing now as a re-activated talent.

"I HAD BEEN in and out of art all of my life but never seriously," she said. A bout with a brain tumor and a temporary

loss of her eyesight was a turning point for the off-and-on artist who decided "to get moving in a positive direction."

Now she says, "One of the best things that ever happened to me was meeting Celi Surbrook when we were Girl Scout Troop leaders on a campout."

"She encouraged me to join the Farmington Artists Club (FAC). I was both in awe of and scared to death of taking that step we all have to take to realize a dream."

The step encouraged by Ms. Surbrook, an award-winning pen and ink artist with FAC, led to classes under the tutelage of Edee Joppich, a former Farmington Artist in Residence title holder and this spring's grand prize winner in the club's show.

The interim years since 1976 brought a determination of self-discipline in her art work and exploring with watercolor, collage, abstract and a host of innovative techniques.

THE ASSOCIATION with art club members also brought her "my biggest thrill when three out of four of my paintings were accepted in the juried gallery of the (FAC)'s show this spring."

The four paintings she selected to submit for the juried gallery were a mix of media and subject, much the same as the works she has put together for the library show.

"But I still lean towards watercolor," she said, "because it is so spontaneous. When the color flows off the brush and is a surprise it excites me and I love it. It is exhilarating."

"Some of my best pieces were a happening between the paper, brush, me and the creative force behind me."

Mrs. Tomkow is also a member of Detroit's Palette & Brush Club and the Birmingham-Bloomfield Art Association.

She is a two-time winner of the FAC's "Artist Choice" awards, and her work is represented in both public and private collections.

Musing about her Mexican paintings in the library show coupled with thoughts about a recent trip to the Orient, Mrs. Tomkow said, "I feel a Japanese series coming on."



Colors bright and bold are used by Gwen Tomkow for the still life of items the Farmington artist brought back from her last trip to Mexico.



The still life above is one of Gwen Tomkow's favorites from a series of watercolors she has completed on Mexico.



Gwen Tomkow mixes realism and abstracts in the collection she has put together for her first one-woman show that remains through the month in Farmington Hills Community Library. (Staff photos by Randy Borst)