

Retarded residents accepted as good neighbors

By CRAIG PITCHURA

"Good neighbors." Those are the words used by five surrounding homeowners to describe 16 retarded men and women who call a community house in the middle of a residential neighborhood their home.

Recent opposition to building a residential home for the retarded in St. Clair Shores and Redford Township strikes a familiar chord with the people who live in the vicinity of the Opportunity House in Plymouth.

Three years ago, when the community house was first proposed at the corner of Wing and Deer, residents turned out in droves at city commission meetings. Many of their concerns were identical to those voiced last week by irate St. Clair Shores residents fighting to keep a home for five retarded women and two supervisors out of their suburban neighborhood.

At the time the Plymouth project was proposed, people such as Edna Taylor of 574 Deer argued that the home for the retarded was not a single-family home. It was a non-profit business that belonged in a business district; certainly not right across the street from her house.

"Oh, my, there was quite a to-do

about it," said Mrs. Taylor, 86, who once owned the lot where the community house now sits but sold the parcel prior to its being considered as a housing site for the retarded.

"We fought it," Mrs. Taylor said. "We were afraid they'd wander away. One person said they'd be on your steps all the time."

The "they" to whom she refers are the eight men and eight women who now live in Opportunity House.

BUT TODAY, after observing the conduct of her retarded neighbors and the immaculate groundskeeping of the house, Mrs. Taylor said she wholeheartedly supports the idea of housing retarded in residential neighborhoods.

"The boys call to you, 'How are you doing Mrs. Taylor' when they're on their way downtown for some shopping," she said. "Yes, I'd say they're very good neighbors."

Her initial fears about the retarded wandering off or sitting around idle also were unfounded, Mrs. Taylor said.

"About the only time you see them is late afternoon in the summer and weekends," she said. "They keep pretty busy. In the morning a bus comes and picks them up to go to

school or to work."

A couple who are neighbors of the Opportunity House opposed the construction of the building three years ago and have since found the residents to be "lovely neighbors." But this couple, who refused to be identified, would still oppose project if it was proposed today on the same site.

"We don't object to what it is, we just think the city should have built something that benefited the whole community on that valuable lot," said the man. "Maybe they could have built something commercial there on the corner to improve our tax base."

Three young men renting a home nearby support the idea of housing retarded in residential neighborhoods. "It's a lot better than sticking them in some institution," said Dave Allum. "They get more attention and it's not as dirty."

Charles Ketcherside, of Wing Street, admitted he fought the construction of the community house and said he's "not sure" if he'd fight it if it came up for city approval today.

"I haven't had any trouble," said Ketcherside. "They play on that side of the street and cross at the corner, so I have no complaint there. One of the reasons I don't like the idea of it was I don't know if its being there has devalued my property. I don't intend to sell but if I did I don't know if anyone else would want to buy here with that across the street."

On Thursday, the day of an unscheduled visit to the Opportunity House, four of the young men who live there were planting a vegetable garden in the backyard with the help of R.D. Crawford of Livonia, a "friend of the family."

"WE ARE a family," said John Chontos, executive director of the Plymouth Opportunity House, "in all intents and purposes. We share a common kitchen, living room, dining room. We are not running a hotel or an apartment building."

"We do the same types of activities normally done in a family. Two of the staff people living here act as house-parents and that's more than just a

title," Chontos said.

The two houseparents are Sr. Marion Haas, a member of the Immaculate Heart of Mary order, and Nancy McLaughlin, formerly of Grand Rapids.

While they are called houseparents, Sr. Marion emphasized that the retarded residents are not called children. Their ages range from 20 to 48 years of age and, she said, residents being called kids or children even though they may act like adolescents because of their retardation.

"Even parents or board members (of the Community Opportunity Center) refer to these people as children," explained Sr. Marion. "Every opportunity I get I try to straighten them out. These people are adults with responsibilities and job duties."

An example of the job duties was a dishwashing schedule for residents posted in the kitchen. Next to the sink, Randy Clayton buttered a piece of homemade bread he baked at the special education skills center in Livonia, where he goes to school under the mandatory education program for all adults under 25 years of age.

Admittedly, the Opportunity House is a home for highly functional retarded people. One of the residents has difficulty walking and talking, but none are severely retarded. One of the women living in the house, Betty Brink, earns a competitive wage working as an aide in a nearby nursing home.

None of the residents appear threatening as some of the people who oppose such centers fear.

"That's because people confuse mental retardation with mental illness," Chontos said. "Many people see the retarded as monsters when they're actually the most passive people I know."

"All they're looking for is some show of affection. That's the only way they can express themselves adequately. Watch them. When anyone walks in, they'll extend their hand to you and ask you your name and how you're doing."

The woman who lives directly behind the Opportunity House knows

her neighbors aren't "deranged" or "monsters."

"I could see all the fuss if these people were violent or mean," said Mrs. Montgomery of 592 Kellogg. "But these people behind my house are so nice. They talk to me. Jimmy always says hello when he rides by on his three-wheeler."

"Maybe it's because of my red hair, but I hear some of these people talk against the retarded and it gets me mad! Why, they've got a right to live like anybody else. They can't help their condition."

"I read the latest story in the paper (about the St. Clair Shores controversy)," Mrs. Montgomery said. "I read it. I don't say too much usually, but it seemed to me that these people

who spoke against it (community houses for the retarded) were kind of hard the way they treated them (the retarded)."

Mrs. Montgomery said she thought it was "hypocritical" for people to criticize the conditions of a state institution such as the Plymouth Center for Human Development and then block efforts to provide a more humane alternative.

The executive director of the Opportunity House, Chontos, said Friday that Opportunity House plans to build community houses for the retarded in Redford Township once they satisfy the "single-family" deed restriction. Following that, he said, houses in Livonia, Garden City and Northville are planned.

Boys find family

(Continued from Page 1A)

experience to guide her clients. Syracuse Press has published a book she wrote about her family, "Our Four Boys."

The Dickerson's attitude toward their boys and all retarded persons is reflected in the title.

French students gain scores, prizes

Farmington high school students were among winners in the fourth annual Foreign Language Day on the Eastern Michigan University campus. Among the Level four French language examination winners are Julie

"It was suggested to us that we include the word retarded in the title. Then they wanted to have pictures of the boys in the book."

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