

2 ways of life for the retarded

Group home living: a new way of life for retarded 'family'

By LEONARD POGER



Giovanni (everyone calls him Johnny) pointed to the bread tray at dinner and grunted.

Janice Allen, a former remedial reading teacher, reminded him to say "bread."

He pointed again and said, "bre-ee-aa."

"Say 'please,' Johnny," Ms. Allen said.

He said "pul-eeze" and the bread was passed around the table. Johnny remembered to say "thank you" when he received the bread tray.

This might not be unusual for a small child learning table manners, but Johnny is 39.

The problem is that he is severely mentally retarded as are the four "brothers" and "sisters" with whom he lives — all mentally retarded adults in their late 20s and early 30s.

They have the mental age of, at the most, 1- or 2-year-olds.

And as much trouble as they might have now assimilating the skills and manners of a polite society, these adults had bigger problems when they were in state institutions.

Then they had no language skills. Their coordination was minimal.

The difference in their present skills — which include setting the dinner table and clearing it afterwards — is attributed to their living in a group home for the retarded for just the past four months.

The GROUP HOME is at 30800 Wentworth in the Merriman-Puritan area of Livonia. It is one of the numerous homes the state mental health department has helped open in the past year.

The state's policy is to "deinstitutionalize" the large facilities which have been described as "warehouses" for the retarded.

Group home supporters feel that the smaller settings, located in single family homes with supervision, can help the retarded better develop their skills.

I spent 25 hours at the Wentworth home to get a better understanding of the retarded. I started out with break-

fast at 6:30 a.m., watched the residents dress themselves, make their beds, and prepare for the weekday workshop instruction — all very similar to a family getting ready for jobs and school.

I rode with the residents to a workshop in the Schoolcraft-Inkster Road area run by the United Cerebral Palsy Association, took part in their nut and bolt assemblies, talked to their instructors, lunched with them, returned home, and took part in their leisure-time activities before dinner was served.

THE GROUP HOME concept has been controversial since the state started moving the retarded out of large institutions and into single family homes run by private, non-profit organizations.

Many horror stories have been imagined by angry homeowners at suburban city council meetings and in letters to newspapers.

There are fears of children being molested, property being vandalized, and values of nearby homes dropping.

What really goes on in a home for the retarded?

In the 25 hours I spent in the Wentworth, I found that the activities were typical of any family of six children.

Actually, it was a bit quieter than most homes with children since the six persons I stayed with have few language skills.

As with most families, members get up at different times.

When I arrived at 6:30 a.m., Sharon and Carol were in the middle of their fried eggs, sausage and toast. I joined them, thanks to the quick kitchen help of Theresa Hendershot, an employee

who was graduated from Garden City East High School five years ago.

Linda, Johnny and Gary got up a short while later for their breakfast.

Theresa, who worked the night shift that morning, and co-worker Susan Rutter, who handles part of the morning shift, said the residents dress themselves and make their beds — a major improvement from their years in a state facility.

Gary was formerly in Plymouth Cen-

ter for Human Development while Carol, Linda, Sharon and Johnny came to Livonia from the state Oakdale facility in Lapeer. (We were prohibited from getting any information about the sixth resident, a woman, because her parents declined to grant permission.)

About 8:30 a.m., when most kids are preparing to leave for school or adults for their jobs, the Wentworth residents climb into a Chevrolet station wagon

for their trip to the Cerebral Palsy workshop.

AT THE WORKSHOP, the residents learn simple tasks — separating individual sticks, assembling nuts and bolts, putting puzzles together.

Part of the cerebral palsy program involves academics. A man about 60 is finally learning to print his name, phone number, and address. He is substantially ahead of four of my house-

mates from Wentworth who are still working on putting nuts and bolts together.

Other classes are held in personal grooming and basics that other people don't have to take a lot of time to think about.

For example, in cold weather, the "students" are taught to wear warm clothing and given descriptions of warm clothing.

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ABOVE: This ranch home (above) at 30800 Wentworth in Livonia houses a family of six retarded adults formerly housed in state institutions.

Staff photos by Bill Bresler

RIGHT: Mike Brown, (second from left) business manager for the organization which runs the group home, enjoys a peaceful moment with residents (from left) Linda, Carol, Johnny and Sharon.

A retarded resident inside J Building prefers to sit in the hallway rather than a dayroom.

But slow progress

Northville: clean, functional

By LEONARD POGER

The day starts early for Curtis Young. His shift starts at 6 a.m. when he has to help eight profoundly retarded men wake up, get dressed and make their beds.

They are in his charge for the rest of his shift. This means Young helps them eat and mops up their chins and tables after their breakfast and lunch.

He works with them the rest of the day, most of which is spent at workshops.

Young, 34, is a residential care aide, or attendant, in J Building (which houses 37 retarded men), Northville Residential Training Center in north-west Wayne County. He has an associate degree in mental health from Wayne State University and wants to get a bachelor's degree in recreational therapy for the retarded.

For 25 hours last month, I joined his group to try to understand what life is like in the Northville center.

What can the profoundly retarded do? Not much.

With persistent training and help, they take weeks or months to learn simple things like eating effectively, putting on matching shoes and taking care of themselves and their clothes.

More difficult things are done for them. They are shaved by attendants using electric razors and are aided in their showers.

THE PROFOUNDLY retarded are at the bottom of the four major levels of mental retardation. At this stage they have the physical coordination, the social skills, the vocabulary of only small children,

six months to perhaps two years.

Most residents in J Building don't have any language skills, but they do understand "eat" for meal-time and "workshop" for the instructional periods in the morning and afternoon.

One workshop instructor, Derrick Freeman, 28, said that simple skills usually take weeks and sometimes months to master.

This includes such things as distinguishing round and square objects, putting the same objects in trays, and assembling nuts and bolts.

One resident finally mastered the nuts and bolts assembly but is having troubles taking it apart, said Freeman, a Livonia Stevenson High School graduate who now lives in Garden City.

Freeman said special treats, like cigarettes, are given to residents for completing tasks on time.

ONE RESIDENT in my ward who was substantially more advanced than the others was David, in his late 20s and with a lanky frame he resembled a high school basketball player.

While the other residents sleep in open wards across the hallway, David has his own bedroom. He can perform intellectually like an 8- or 9-year-old. That means he can just barely print names and numbers.

David keeps in practice by keeping a list of attendants' telephone extensions and home numbers. With advance permission, David phones them.

How is the food in a state institution? In my case, two out of three is pretty good. The quantity is substantial.

Breakfast is served in two shifts starting at 7:30 a.m.

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