

Sunderland home closes after 23 years

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On June 30, Violet St. John turned the key for the last time in the doors of the Sunnydale Children's Home in Sunderland.

Established in 1966 by the provincial government in an attempt to alleviate some of the overcrowding at the Orillia centre for the mentally handicapped, Sunnydale was home to 77 children, many of whom were there for the full 23 years of the home's operation.

"These kids were both physically and mentally han-

aid in 1968, St. John who was the administrator at the time of the home's closing, said, "there were 37 children who came here in 1966 and were still here when the home closed. For the past 23 years, we were their family."

The Sunderland home was closed under the government's initiative to close institutions and move handicapped individuals into group homes. "The government feels that they will have a better life than they would have in the institutions, so they put them out into the community," said St. John. But she questioned why they couldn't have stayed in

"We kept telling them that they'd go to a new home... but whether they really absorbed it or not is hard to tell."

dicapped," said St. John, "and all were totally dependent on nursing care."

Though classified as unteachable and untrainable, the children cum adults who made the Sunderland home their own, were, according to St. John, as individual as any other group of people. "They couldn't talk or walk, and most of them didn't even cry, but you soon learned to tell when they were happy, sad or in distress, by working with them every day. I always just thought of them as people who needed special help."

But in fact, St. John thought of them as more than that, she thought of them as family. Since coming to Sunnydale as a nurse's

the community they were already in.

"The community of Sunderland has always accepted the home and they accepted the kids as part of the community," she said. In nice summer weather it was not unusual for the home's residents to be found picnicking on the lawn. "If someone went for the mail they always took one of the kids with them, and for as long as Sunderland had a barber, we took the kids there to get their hair cut," St. John said. "We were part of a community. They even went to the local dentist."

At its peak, the Sunnydale Children's Home employed 60

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