

United Way funds operation

Work program aids mentally retarded

Getting a summer job at a local clothing store changed Jenny's life.

Jenny (not her real name) is mentally retarded. She had never had a job and perhaps never expected to be fortunate enough to have one. But under the Newmarket & District Association for the Mentally Retarded Work Experience Program, she came to the clothing store as an unpaid, on-the-job trainee.

Under supervision, Jenny worked at general retail duties, including serving customers. Her confidence soared, as did her sense of independence and self respect and with good reason: Jenny did so well that the store owner offered her a part-time, paying position when she finishes school.

New lease on life

Programs like Work Experience are giving people like Jenny a brand new lease on life. It's all part of the service of the Newmarket & District Association for the Mentally Retarded (NDAMR). From its Bogart Street headquarters, it works to help special needs children and adults develop to their full potential.

Says Lorna Woods, Executive Director, "Jenny is a shining example of what can be achieved with a little guidance and encouragement."

"In order for their needs to be met, disabled people have to be integrated into the mainstream of society. Most mentally retarded persons can live at least partly independent lives within the community and it's important that they do so."

NDAMR was established in 1954 as one of the first schools for mentally retarded children, now called the Fairmede School. The organization now has a staff of 50 full-time and 20 part-time workers who, along with numerous volunteers, provide services and programs for 178 developmentally handicapped individuals in the Newmarket-Aurora area.

Vocational assessment and training, adult residential programs, group homes, foster care, and parent relief are all available, along with a wide range of recreational activities.

Program supported

The Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services provides the bulk of the almost \$2 million that is required to run these programs. However, the United Way of York Region contributes \$34,000 which, combined with money from the Ontario Government's Trillium Fund, goes to support the Work Experience Program that made such a difference to Jenny.

Says Ms. Woods, "Without the United Way's help, I don't know where we would get the money to complete our budget. We'd be forced to discontinue Work Experience."

Ms. Woods hardly need add that it would be a tragedy if such a successful program were abandoned. She points out that Jenny is just one of its many success stories.

There is, for example, Frank (not his real name). Through Work Experience he was able to build a solid record in real employment situations. The experience he gained has paid off. Frank has just landed a full-time job washing dishes at a local restaurant. At the same time, he's being trained in food preparation.

Big step

For Frank, as for Jenny, that's a big step forward in life, perhaps a far bigger one than most of us will ever take.

Closely allied to Work Experience is the ARC Industries program now in its 22nd year. Forty-five men and women are currently participating in its employment training and sheltered workshop programs. They are taught basic job skills such as punctuality, attendance, grooming, and the ability to work under supervision.

In addition, they get valuable on-the-job training in the production workshop, assembling and packaging products such as greeting cards and toys. There are also classes in woodworking, shipping, and maintenance.

One group of graduates has formed a shopping plaza clean-up crew which operates on a year-round basis.

Residential Services

With the special skills they have learned, many retarded adults

are able to realize NDAMR's goal of living and working on their own with only minimal supervision.

What supervision is necessary, the Association provides through its Adult Residential Services Program. Its 42 members live in various homes and apartments in the Newmarket-Aurora area. They cook, clean, shop, and even have a say in the development of house rules.

Ms. Woods points out that the amount of support each individual receives is tailored to his or her specific needs. The goal, however, is always the same: to maximize opportunities for a full and independent life.

Unfortunately, this may mean leaving home at a very young age. But whenever possible, NDAMR tries to find alternatives to institutionalization, one of which is the Foster Care Program under

which youngsters are placed in qualified private homes.

Change helped

Jane (not her real name) is one of five children currently in Foster Care. Born severely handicapped by cerebral palsy and mental retardation, she seemed to have little chance in life.

The Association arranged for her to be taken out of an institution and placed in a warm, loving, home environment where she could get the personal attention she needed. As a result, Jane has blossomed.

Lorna Woods explains that, "It has been an exceptional achievement for a little girl who used to cry constantly from pain and loneliness."

"Because of daily physiotherapy, she can move her limbs more freely and without pain. Moreov-

er, her fine motor skills have improved remarkably. Now Jane is smiling and laughing and even going to school.

It should be noted that Foster Care is not NDAMR's first preference. It encourages the natural parent-child relationship whenever possible. And in some cases, children have returned home after going through the Foster Care Program.

Parents need help

Parents of mentally handicapped children do need help, too, if only in the short term. That's the idea behind the Respite Care Service. Through arrangements such as the "In-Home" and "Host-Family" programs, parents can get a short, but much needed, break from child care.

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