

Retarded have rights too

By Anne Rose

Roger is learning to talk. Eager to improve his ability, he repeats whole sentences from the book his friend reads to him. At school he practices working with letters and numbers and developing his coordination.

Roger is 12 years old.

For the first 10 years of his life, he lived in a crib in a small room where several other youngsters were similarly confined. Having cerebral palsy and diagnosed as severely mentally retarded, he was abandoned by his parents and consigned to a basket-case existence.

Things are better for him now that he is under the care of the Fort Worth State School, a pilot program for Texas in which mentally retarded children live in satellite facilities around the city or at home with their parents and go by bus daily to special developmental centers.

Roger (not his real name) has an extra advantage which should assure his not getting locked away out of sight again: he has a citizen advocate.

"The people taking care of him know that someone is involved," says Carol Hitter, sociology graduate teaching assistant and one of Roger's two advocates. "I call out there a lot. I talk to his teachers and nurses about things we might need for Roger and

things we might do. The citizen advocate is involved in the whole thing, to make sure he gets a fair shake."

A program of the National Association for Retarded Citizens (NARC), citizen advocacy is a one-to-one relationship between a capable volunteer ("advocate") and a mentally retarded person ("protege"). The advocate defends the rights and interests of the protege and provides practical or emotional support. More independent than the traditional volunteer, the advocate actively represents his protege and can also serve as a model.

Interaction

"In order to learn how to act normally, a person needs to have interaction with others," Hitter said. "We go places and do things. I take a lot of library books out there and read to him and we talk a lot."

As well as looking out for Roger's interests, Hitter also serves as chairman of Fort Worth's citizen advocacy program, begun in September. She notes that 21,000 persons termed mentally retarded live in Fort Worth, 95 per cent of whom can live by themselves or with their families and are capable of some kind of self-support.

She hopes to have 100 advocates by the end of the summer. "It's been tremendously successful with young

people throughout the country in the last two years. There are all different kinds of relationships, just depending on the people involved and how much time they have to give."

She told of another advocate, Jim, whose protege, "Jeff," is close to his own age. "They do a lot of running around together. They go to the movies and study together. It's just love skills."

The program now numbers 8,000 persons nationwide, estimates Jane Kolodziej of NARC, whose national headquarters is in Arlington. "Almost all the advocates are relatively young," she said, "falling within the 18 to 30 range. It's a funny thing. I guess young people have the energy or are willing to give that much time to someone else."

Kolodziej said the typical advocate spends two or three hours a week with his protege, with the two going somewhere together or visiting one another's homes. Pairs are carefully matched for "compatibility of interests — things they can share," she said. Geographical proximity is another factor.

Because of the care in matching, many relationships endure for several years. Most advocates who quit do so only because they're moving away. The average time is 12 to 18 months.

"In some areas they will match two advocates to a protege, for instance a

freshman and a senior," she added, so that when the older one graduates, the protege still has an advocate he knows.

Adult volunteers not only give proteges needed peer-group friendships but also bring idealism and assertiveness to the advocate role.

Ask questions

Jim became suspicious of Jeff's inability to concentrate at times, Hitter said. After Jim discovered his protege was routinely receiving a behavior-controlling drug which is counter-indicated for mental retardation, he persuaded Jeff's doctors to review his medication.

"Often," Hitter said, "professionals are so overloaded that it takes someone saying 'wait a minute' to ask the question 'is this really necessary?'"

Persons interested in becoming citizen advocates can call the Fort Worth NARC office at 336-8661. After the matching process, a six-hour training session prepares applicants to work with their proteges.

"The neat thing about this," Hitter said of the program, "is that you're not a volunteer to an agency but to a person. In other kinds of volunteer work, often you don't get to see the difference you make. But here it's immediate. You can say 'that child's life is different because I was there.'"