

Enabling Workers

New grant keeps Syracuse University on the disability vanguard

People with disabilities used to be called "the least of the least." They were hidden away all their lives, barred from schools with "typical" pupils, institutionalized and forgotten — except by resigned parents and siblings.

Things began to change in 1975 with passage of IDEA — the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act — that affirmed every child's right to an education. By then, the movement for "inclusion" already had begun, along with a campaign to move people with disabilities from institutions into life's mainstream. In 1990, the Americans with Disabilities Act outlawed discrimination and required accessibility to public facilities and the workplace.

During this time, Syracuse became a standard-setter and a progressive force for change. At Syracuse University the late Burton Blatt, whose groundbreaking work, "Christmas in Purgatory," exposed the grim world of institutions for the mentally retarded, created the Center for Human Policy. Graduates from SU's trailblazing special-education programs led inclusive classrooms at Jowonio, a school where typical children learn side by side with special-needs peers. Inclusion spread to the Syracuse City School District — and beyond. SU also did groundbreaking work on autism, led by Professor Douglas Biklen and others.

Meanwhile, more and more people with special needs began living in the community. In 1998, the Syracuse Developmental Center discharged its last residents and closed its doors. Today many of them live in dozens of group homes scattered throughout Central New York, with 50 more planned over the next three years. Staff writer Jim McKeever is chronicling life at one such residence in a continuing series that helps bury stereotypes and reinforce the utterly



Dennis Nett / Staff photographer

CHRIS JUDGE, a resident of a group home for five developmentally disabled men in DeWitt, looks at a drawing he made on the coffee table.

human reality of "mainstreaming."

Now SU has the opportunity to take its mission to a new level with a \$2.5 million federal grant to its new Burton Blatt Institute. Over the next five years, the institute will work on removing stubborn obstacles to employment for people with disabilities.

The focus is on employers — how to modify practices and workplaces to accommodate the disabled and capitalize on their energy and talents. Cross-disciplinary research involves labor relations, management law, technology, social psychology and economics. The project's reach is national, with forums envisioned across the country.

All can benefit from inclusion, explains SU senior researcher William Myhill — for example, by installing adjustable desks that also accommodate "typical" employees of varying heights. Years of classroom experience demonstrate how inclusion spreads its benefits in more personal ways — by raising awareness and tolerance, inspiring creative approaches and problem-solving.

While thousands of Central New Yorkers with disabilities already are gainfully employed, thousands more are not. Nationally, some 12 million adult Americans with disabilities are unemployed. Now SU will have a chance to reduce those numbers — and make this a richer, more just society.