

EDITOR'S NOTEBOOK/Bernard Rimland, Ph.D.

The Non-Urban Alternative

Like most parents of autistic adults, my wife and I are often asked what long-term plans we have for Mark, our autistic son. Mark has always lived with us, in our home. Like most parents of autistic adults, we have given Mark's future long and careful consideration. Unlike most parents of autistic adults, I have had the opportunity to visit a vast number of facilities for autistic people, have talked and corresponded with many thousands of parents and professionals, and have read much of what has been written about autism for over 30 years.

Before sharing my thoughts with you, let me emphasize something we all know, but nevertheless often overlook: not only are you and I very different; our children differ markedly from each other as well.

Given our "druthers," my wife and I feel that Mark's future would be happiest, most meaningful and productive, on a farm or ranch with similarly handicapped peers and companions.

A dozen years ago Mark, then 22, spent part of the summer at the farm operated by Benhaven in Connecticut. He loved it, and talks about it to this day. Feeding the chickens, collecting the eggs, planting, watering, gathering vegetables for sale and for the table was meaningful, productive work to Mark. Farming has been meaningful and productive work for the vast majority of mankind for hundreds of generations, since farming was invented some 60 centuries ago. Mark returned home fit, tan, and healthy. He takes pride today in reporting the growth and ripening of the tomatoes, cucumbers, lettuce and squash he tends carefully in our backyard garden.

There are a number of farms and ranches for autistic adults and teenagers in various places in the U.S., as of course, in other countries. Perhaps the best known is Bittersweet Farms in Ohio. A soon-to-be-published book, *Autistic Adults at Bittersweet Farms*, provides a great deal of invaluable why, what and how information about Bittersweet Farms and related settings.

Similar communities are being developed in North Carolina, California, and elsewhere. In the Netherlands, the Dr. LeoKannerhuis houses 20 adolescents with autism. Four houses, each accommodating between four and six residents, are located near a workshop and a farmyard on the grounds of a hospital. Residents work a five-hour day at greenhouse and farming chores, housework, poultry raising, gardening, caring for livestock, and keeping up the buildings.

Rusty's Morningstar Ranch in Arizona is a smaller, non-urban residential center for autistic young men, who learn and practice the art of ranching from experienced ranch hands. Jack and Carlene Armstrong established Rusty's Morningstar Ranch several years ago, when they concluded that the high stress of the rapidly growing city of Phoenix was much more than they could ex-

pect their autistic son Rusty to cope with.

There are five Camphill villages and schools in the U.S., and over 50 in Europe and Africa, dedicated to providing rural living and learning opportunities to the mentally handicapped. I am not personally aware of autistic residents of Camphill.

Appealing as they are to some, including our family, non-urban farm and ranch settings such as Bittersweet Farms and Rusty's Morningstar Ranch are met with disdain and strenuous objections from a small but vocal segment of parents and professionals. Their complaints, as I understand them, seem to be largely ideological in nature. They seem to feel that farm life somehow violates two catchwords currently in favor: "community" and "integration." Since farm and ranch communities have existed for centuries, I do not understand why this new concept of communities recognizes only those in urban settings, such as urban group homes—small urban group homes—as acceptable residences for adults handicapped by autism, retardation, and similar disabilities.

One nationally recognized educator refers to non-urban residences disparagingly as "funny farms," calling attention to the old (and intelligent, in my opinion) practice of placing handicapped persons out of harm's way, in low-stress rural settings, in what is usually a kinder, gentler environment.

Why a farm?

I know many parents who are pleased with their adult son's or daughter's placement in a rural setting, just as I know many who are pleased with a placement in an urban group home. Why do my wife and I prefer a rural setting for our son? Here are some of our reasons:

1. **Long-term security.** Economic downturns and political budget-slashing are serious threats which rural residences seem intrinsically better able to survive. Here in California group homes (there are about 3,000!) open slowly, and often close quickly, sometimes without much warning. There have been cases in which group homes closed with *no* warning. A major concern to my wife and myself is to protect our son from ever becoming one of the homeless street persons. A farm or ranch setting does not guarantee against such catastrophes, but does to us seem to offer significantly greater stability.

2. **Safety/stress.** The increasingly stressful conditions of urban life, especially the high rate of violent crime, take their toll daily on even those of us considered normal. Being robbed, assaulted, lost, or even losing keys or missing a bus can be an immensely more traumatic event for the autistic person than for the rest of us. More than once Mark has returned home after a ride on the city bus, badly shaken by an encounter with an overzealous religionist, whose talk of sins and proffering of tracts were beyond Mark's

comprehension. A non-urban environment seems to us to be much less dangerous, less stressful, and more forgiving.

3. **Meaningful work.** People's tastes and preferences vary enormously, but it seems to me that taking care of farm animals and growing vegetables are much more likely to be intrinsically understandable and rewarding than most of the kinds of jobs that are available in an urban setting. This is certainly so in Mark's case. Mark has compiled and stapled innumerable papers, stuffed innumerable envelopes, licked and affixed countless stamps, and performed a great deal of other kinds of repetitive office work. He does it willingly, but he doesn't really like it, and considers it boring. Most of the jobs I'm aware of in sheltered workshops or in supported employment seem to us to be of a similar sort. We want Mark's life and work to be as rewarding as possible.

4. **Congenial associates.** Despite the great (inordinate?) popularity of the idea of integration, it is obvious to us that Mark, and many other handicapped people, are happiest, and feel most at home, among similarly handicapped people.

I am all too well aware of once happy handicapped individuals whose lives have been made miserable by their being "integrated" into a work situation, usually in a supported employment setting, where they feel isolated and excluded from the conversations and social activities of their non-handicapped coworkers. Imagine being dropped into a setting where people functioned at an intellectual level perhaps 50 or more IQ points above yours, where their comments, jokes and conversations occurred on a level far above your capacity to comprehend, and where your infrequent inclusion into their activities and conversations was largely a function of their kindness and patience. Not very satisfactory—at least from our family's point of view.

The need for options

There are clearly pluses and minuses for each of the available options. The important point is that an increasing number of options are becoming available, so that concerned parents and guardians can begin to select the residential setting most appropriate to the autistic persons in their care. A dark cloud on the horizon concerns me, however. Those ideologically committed to the small urban group home exclusively may yet succeed in achieving their goal of outlawing, in one way or another, the options some families prefer. The Chaffee bill would have prevented federal funds from reaching residences, such as Bittersweet Farms, for 15 or more handicapped persons. Not every residence with over 15 beds is a Willowbrook; not every group home is a utopia. We must be wary of advocates who strive to close off options which are not to their personal liking.