Deinstitutionalization of Nicholas Romeo

His case changed the fate of the retarded.
Nicholas Romeo forced changes in the way the retarded are treated that he himself can't begin to understand, and which are still going on.

BY JOHN WOESTENDIEK

T hey were a strange but familiar sight walking hand in hand down the streets of South Philadelphia — Frank Romeo, the burly shipfitter, setting a steady heel-to-toe pace, and his retarded son, Nick, a gangly 26-year-old with a gait that was the opposite, toe-to-heel.

Frank knew most everybody in the neighborhood, so they'd stop a lot, popping into Claudio's, a cheese shop on Ninth Street where Nick had a habit of grabbing olives from a big jar on the counter, or into Pietà's, a bar on Passyunk Avenue where men would talk sports and Nick would drink sodas and dance to the jukebox.

Nick was always dancing, or jogging, or jumping up and down, always headed somewhere or doing something — a perpetual child in perpetual motion. Except for the two, maybe three hours a night he slept, there was no end to his curiosity, or his energy. Even before Nick learned to walk, at 4, Frank Romeo and his wife, Paula, learned that the way to keep Nick happy was to keep him active. So they hiked around the neighborhood, and went on weekend trips to the Jersey shore or on daylong excursions to the park. At home, they would play with him until they could stay awake no longer, then sleep in shifts, driven, it seemed, to fashion a life of sorts for a son who hadn't been dealt much of one.

For 26 years, they had listened to doctors and social workers and friends tell them Nick should be "put away." Each time, it was like a slap in the face. You "put away" your socks, not your only son. With your only son — your "flesh and blood," as Frank would say — you did what you could, maybe spoiling him a bit in the process, but keeping him happy and under control. The reigns were loose, but there was never any doubt that Frank Romeo held them.

On May 10, 1974, Frank was sitting in his chair amid the usual spirited chaos that marked family gatherings at the Romeo rowhouse on McLean Street. Glenn Miller was blaring on the record player. Nick was on the floor at his father's feet, boistering and hammering on a Playskool peg-and-hole toy. And Paula was headed to the store to pick up some linguine for dinner. She took Nick along in the station wagon. Before they returned, Frank Romeo clutched his chest and fell to the floor, dead of a heart attack.

Death, like most things, had no meaning for Nick. When a family friend brought him to the funeral home, he grabbed one of his father's beefy hands, folded neatly on top of his best suit, and tried to tug him from the casket so they could go for a walk, or fishing, or paddle-boating, like they always did.

In the days that followed, Nick, his brown eyes bouncing back and forth between looks of anger, frustration and fear, would run from room to room of the rowhouse, groaning when he couldn't find his father. He would grab his mother's hand, pull her out of the house and lead her to all the places Frank had taken him.

Each day, he grew more agitated. He got fevers. He screamed, and broke things. He kicked and slapped, hit his hand and banged his head against the wall — things he had done only once in a while in the past, probably, his mother always figured, because he had no way to express himself. Now, though, he was doing them more frequently and more fiercely, and Frank Romeo wasn't there to...
Here was Romeo, of Supreme Court fame, Pennhurst’s most-watched resident, with 50 fresh welts on his back, chest and buttocks — all in the shape of a toilet bowl brush.

Pennhurst

DOCTOR'S NEWS LETTER

July 17, 1969

HEALING and it was scary.

The caretaker had his husband’s death, a desolate Paula took Nick to a hospital, which sent him to Pennhurst, the state mental hospital, where doctors put him to bed and left him in a drug-induced stupor.

They would later (at 4 a.m., in a mental residents..."

Achilles tendon made his gait floor. Paula would spend most of them in a teary claimed on paper.

curly brown remained empty, as it had for most of the...

The last blank on the commitment papers..."

Twenty-one days would pass. Nick would spend...

The last three years, Nick had lived out his lives...

And one time, he started taking steps... My husband...

And stomp on you.

"cruel" Paula and "poor kid" Nick, was still a handful. She vaguely remembers seeing them in the blanks, but she doesn’t remember exactly...

She was sick herself with heart problems, and...

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It was pretty obvious why Nicky had been attacked by other people... it was pretty much an open operation.

At Pennhurst, the U.S. Department of Justice had also joined the suit by them, by there, and by a filming photographer. Fotinger, a mental retar... a law on the state attorney general's.
Hitting himself

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them would say when they saw toward him it was unbelievable. It battle lines go near between the Romeo baby, "him."

some of wouldn't deciding in their woman away with about getting away with it. The re never reported as such, were up as Nick's toilet brush injuries, couple as Nick's of injuries written didn't like him.

thinks the aide would brag that she had done. Although his scheduled departure from Pennhurst was still more than a month away, even one involved agreed to move to a group home immediately. During his last three days at the institution, Nick was under a 24-hour-a-day watch by state police.

On April 5, 1983, Nicholas Romeo, men, under police secret, walked out of Pennhurst.

Nick would still be injured and some of those injuries, though never reported as such, were staff inflicted, according to em.

People would grab about getting away with it. There were a couple of injuries written up as his doing it himself that I know for sure staff did," said Walter Viola, who worked for almost a year as Nick's personal aide. "People didn't like him. They were either afraid of him or his reputation, and they knew his mother could have you reassigned. He was watched by a lot of people all the time. To some people, it became a challenge to hurt Nick Romeo and-0-

of Nick's toilet brush injuries, Joe Thomas, a worker at

was rough for the first few months. It was hard to know what to make of them. They lift their heads to a side like puppy paws, listening with wide eyes as he walks down the street on the toes of his orthopedic boots behind him, holding the hand of another man and squinting happy sounds.

Nick has stood out a lot since he came to thisujit, middle

class Northeast Philadelphia neighborhood more than a year ago. His long hair could be heard at backyard barbecues, where neighbors have given him to John and Diana O'Donnell, who live in a house in which Nick lives, there was a small party when Nick was coming through the neighborhood.

He pulled the towl racks off the bathroom wall, and smashed it into the toilet bowl. He ripped off the shirts and jackets people had left and threw them on the ground. There are three sets of furniture for the boys and one for the girls. Some of them are covered withterry cloth, and there are more than a dozen trash cans - and a toilet tank for each- - in the garage, - in the wall where Nick has put his head.

He has raised similar havoc at the Great Neck

Pennhurst, where he spends his time. Each Saturday, he spends hours at the Pennhurst workshop (putting an auto.

Pats on the hand or a pats on the head by a worker at

Nick's good behavior has been rewarded with critics, the affectionate happy one Paula remembers from a day ago.

Every weekday morning, his hand has to be given, Nick goes to the workshop, where he receives physical therapy and occasional training. At 6 a.m., staff members of the group home pick him up. Sometimes, if he has had a

bedtime accident at the workshop, he returns carrying a large hefty bag containing his washed clothes, but those accidents, too, have decreased. And he recently completed his first production work at the workshop (cutting auto parts in a box) and was paid for the job.

It was rough for the first few months, partly because he really needed to stay at the training center, and partly because the severity of his behavior was not always expressed in terms of survival of the neighborhood do not know much about Nick. The others had never really seen him. Some tell their children to cross the street when they see him. It comes as a surprise to him, but the topic is one of their new neighbors.

They are worried, too, about their property values. They have complained to city zoning officials, to the Pennsylvania State Legislature, and to senator, only to find that, because Pennsylvania is a common law state, there are no firm laws on the matter, there is nothing they could do about their new neighbors.

Nick, however, can be watching much as a poor man can.

The Pennsylvania family, like many in the area, in their opinion of Nick as "needy."

are opposed to closing state institutions, and they are opposed to the state's plans for reform. They are opposed to the state's plans for reform. One of them, a worker at

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