HELPED RETARDED

Village
Is Working

The idea of combining a tourist attraction and a training center for training mentally retarded citizens is working well at the Acadian Village and Tropical Gardens, but more retarded people can be helped.

Jacque Privat, facility manager for Acadian Village, said there are only 10 mentally retarded clients employed full time at the Village, where 25 could be working. Any parent or guardian of a mentally retarded person can call Privat at 981-3388, if they think their child could be in the program.

Acadian Village is a reproduction of an authentic 19th Century village in Southwest Louisiana. Last summer, during its first tourist season, the village had 10,000 visitors, including tourists from 33 foreign countries.

Mentally retarded clients are employed full time and part time at the Village and the adjacent Tropical Gardens. "They do all the grounds maintenance work, and repair work such as carpentry, welding and masonry, plant propagation and greenhouse maintenance. Two of the clients also clerk in the Acadian Village gift store. All the clients are paid wages.

"The work not only instills certain skills in our clients, but, more importantly, instills good habits and proper attitudes necessary for entering the working world," Privat said.

Already, some of the clients previously employed at the Village have taken regular jobs.

"We placed three men as dishwashers in a local restaurant," Privat said.

"They had no dishwashing experience, but their attitude and work habits were good enough to persuade an employer to hire them.

One man got a job as a maintenance worker for an oil company. He bought a car and is saving money to buy some property, Privat said.

Meanwhile, the Lafayette Tourist Attraction With A Heart" is providing a source of income for the Lafayette Association for Retarded Citizens (LARC), according to public relations director Mrs. Marti Gutierrez.

Sixty percent of the gate receipts from Acadian Village tours is returned to the association. The rest of the money is used to pay client and staff salaries.

"We've become a money-making project for LARC," Mrs. Gutierrez said.

The Village consists of both authentic Acadian homes, and reproductions of buildings. Now that insurance has been taken out to protect people from thefts, antique Acadian furniture from Lafayette families is being donated for use in the Village.

The Telephone Pioneers of America have raised $15,000 so far to build an authentic boat dock at the Village general store. Mrs. Gutierrez said that of course the boats will be used by residents, as a general store has to have a dock.

The Junior League of Lafayette, the Acadiana Civic Club and the Friends of the Retarded have all contributed time and money toward the Village, Mrs. Gutierrez said.

The general store in the Village also serves as an outlet for crafts made by mentally retarded clients at the neighboring New Hope Center for the retarded. The store has increased crafts sales, resulting in increased production by clients.

"We've sold between $300 and $500 worth of handicapped produced items per month, since the store opened," Mrs. Gutierrez.

Both Mr. and Mrs. Gutierrez believe the numbers of visitors to Acadian Village will increase once two billboards advertising the Village and Tropical Gardens are put up on I-10.