

The parade's gone by

By Joe Killeen

Willowbrook bounced up into the news again. A change in personnel resulted in another layer of speculation as to the causes and solutions of the place. This latest flurry of happenings regarding the facility hovered over many of the personalities that have slowly, almost imperceptibly, transformed Willowbrook from a story of "... filth, disease and death ..." into a parade of personalities. A parade that illustrates how the "snake-pit" of 1965 evaporated into the files of newspapers, television and the public. Eight months after Geraldo Rivera dashed over the fence, Willowbrook is still groping for a resolution of its existence.

Geraldo Rivera of Channel Seven Eyewitness News was the first celebrity of the national media to become associated with the Willowbrook story, a position that led Geraldo to comment that despite increased media interest, he and Eyewitness News, "owned the story." Geraldo made a press release recently and it's some indication of how far he has progressed through the pageant.

The Williamsburgh State School is one of those newer, community based facilities that the State Department of Mental Hygiene has been touting as their answer to Willowbrook. Originally intended as a neighborhood center that would house 70 residents - patients who were to be transferred from larger overcrowded institutions to the sterile halls of Williamsburgh. But, like most everything else in the Willowbrook story, Williamsburgh became something else.

The State, after realizing that budget cuts and job freezes were not limited to Willowbrook, found they did not have the staff or money to open up its recently refurbished holding. They began to contact various non-profit volunteer agencies in the Metropolitan area asking them to use the Williamsburgh facility as a

home for out-patient services. Dangling much sought after grant money to the groups as an incentive to take over the building, the State admitted it did not have the resources to provide its promised relief to those "deplorable conditions at Willowbrook."

Ida Rappaport, executive director of ACRMD, a city-wide organization long active in providing educational services to the retarded, was one of those groups that turned down a \$70,000 grant because as she stated, "We felt the new change in plans was a sell out to the 70 residents of the larger institutions that would not be transferred. The offer was just an attempt by the State to get itself off the hook."

The State eventually found someone to take the grant and as Ida emphasized, "... get them off the hook..." - enter Geraldo and the press release.

It seems that the State Association for Retarded Children and its president, Willowbrook Board of Visitor Joe Weingold, had been the "hook takers." Announcing their opening day ceremonies, the Association stated that Geraldo Rivera, star of Eyewitness News, was to chair the event. The same Geraldo who stated that he didn't want to cover a news conference by Assemblyman Andrew Stein because Stein was a publicity hound. Geraldo did cover the conference and offered as his reason the desire to show how his seven minute "expose" of Willowbrook had been picked-up by the other professional newscasters of Fun City.

The irony that Geraldo's latest escapades represent were underscored by the recent publication of his book on his award winning role in the Willowbrook saga. Recounting sorrowful days of contemplation that preceded a call he received from the fired Doctor Wilkins, he told of his desire to get a "big story." A "big story" in the media game brings the awards, which

Geraldo won, and the awards allow a professional newscaster the opportunity to pick his assignments. In his desire to find that "big story" he put Mike Wilkins off for a few days. Finally, he deemed the story worthy and made his trip.

But, that's not the end of Geraldo's latest movements. A recent review in Life Magazine, a review of a newsmen who usually has two minutes of air time, was a piece on Geraldo and his Willowbrook coverage. And in a reversal of the current trend, that has politicians turning to careers in the media, Geraldo announced his sincere intentions to be Mayor of the Big Apple. So much for the "new television."

Another character departed from the Willowbrook story. Jack Hammond, director of the institution, was transferred to another State facility for the mentally retarded at Rome, New York. Recanting an earlier edict of not, "having to tell you people (the press) anything!" Hammond granted an interview to the local daily.

Continuing his efforts to balance the criticism leveled at his charge, Hammond offered, "The fault of Willowbrook is not mine. I did make progress here." Hammond seemed to clarify his own position in the hierarchy of the State by adding, "Thirty years ago, large institutions were the thing. Now the emphasis is one the foster homes, hostels and community services and return to the family and community." Hammond's parting shots seemed to reflect a severe case of "future shock."

But, Hammond did see change and hope for the future. Some others don't share his enthusiasm and the neglect he is beginning to feel is apparently enshrining itself in the wards of the complex.

"The institution's records may indicate an improvement

in the numbers of staff, but I haven't seen one shred of evidence to support this. I've just returned from bringing my son back to Willowbrook after a weekend at home. There was one attendant on his ward to care for seventy children." That's a parent, Connie Haney. On Jack Hammond's removal, "Let's just say that I'm not too unhappy that he is leaving."

"Conditions are still abominable. The State and the administration seem to be operating from the opinion that they will not go over what will be demanded of them." William Bronson is a clinical physician at Willowbrook. The cosmetic changes he spoke of were fresh paint for a number of wards.

A group of attendants spoke of several buildings where, "even with the paint and cleaning, they still can't get rid of that smell." After eight months of "concern" and money, Willowbrook still can't remove the stench. And despite some mysteriously discovered money and thaws in job freezes, Willowbrook doesn't appear to be making out too well in acquiring the horde of staff that was expected.

"The conditions in Building 32 are among the best on the grounds of the institution. What the administration is now doing is transferring employees from that building to other wards where they are receiving attacks from well organized parent groups. The employee who mentioned this latest staffing policy added, "I've just come off-duty and Building 32 had nine people watching 269 patients."

Bronson mentioned the shifting personnel patterns, "It's all part of the change to keep people tricked into believing that something will change."

One person who isn't tricked is Mike Wilkins. The physician fired for organizing parents to combat conditions at the complex, Wilkins isn't fooled, but, he is also leaving the scene of the conflict.

"It's not just understaffing or underfunding. The big