

# Girl's mother critical of care at Willowbrook

By **RAYMOND A. WITTEK**

"Willowbrook has destroyed my child."

Tears welled in Mrs. Amelia Renelli's eyes and she sobbed quietly from the witness stand as she told how her 22-year-old daughter, epileptic and mentally retarded, has steadily regressed since she entered Willowbrook State School in September 1960.

Mrs. Renelli, a Bronx resident, broke down three times while testifying at the opening of a Supreme Court hearing into charges by her and her husband, John, that their daughter has been mistreated at Willowbrook.

Mr. and Mrs. Renelli, represented by Congressman Mario Biaggi of the Bronx, contend that unless their daughter and other residents at the school receive at least a minimum level of care and attention they will further deteriorate as human beings, losing even the few self-help skills they had when they entered Willowbrook.

Biaggi has cited constitutional grounds to support Mr. and Mrs. Renelli's position that residents at public institutions such as Willowbrook are entitled to adequate and effective treatment programs that might help in their rehabilitation.

These have been lacking at Willowbrook, Mr. and Mrs. Renelli claim.

Dr. Gunnar Dybwad, professor of human development at Brandeis University in Waltham, Mass., called as an expert witness by the petitioners, said it is now generally accepted by authorities on the mentally retarded that each patient has "a capacity for some growth and development" and is capable of being rehabilitated to some degree.

Dr. Dybwad, an expert on the social rehabilitation of the mentally retarded, said that Willowbrook lacked even minimal standards of care and treatment.

He said he based his view on a visit to Willowbrook last March in connection with another court case. At the time, he said he visited some of the buildings in which Adrienne had been a patient.

Assistant State Attorney General Judith Gordon conceded in an opening statement that the state Mental Hygiene Department, against which the petition is directed, has a duty to protect the safety of Willowbrook residents.

## 100 INJURIES

She said she will show what incidents caused the various injuries suffered by Adrienne and how they were treated. She added, however, that no one following normal precautions can be expected to safeguard residents all the time.

Mrs. Renelli testified that her daughter's injuries, observed by her on weekly visits, were "too numerous to recall."

When pressed for a number by Biaggi, Mrs. Renelli estimated that there had been more than 100, including fractures, bruises, bites, black eyes, sores, crushed fingernails and toenails and swollen hands. She told of one occasion when her daughter's eyes were closed for four months.

When she questioned school supervisors about the injuries, she said she was told the school was understaffed and the staff members were "doing the best they could."

Mrs. Renelli said she rarely talked to doctors and then only briefly, during the 12 years her daughter has been at Willowbrook.

Under questioning by the assistant attorney general, Mrs. Renelli admitted she had talked to a social worker and doctors

at another hospital in connection with her daughter's admission to Willowbrook.

Mrs. Renelli had said in earlier testimony that the only time she spoke to a social worker was when her daughter was admitted to Willowbrook and that her daughter had never been "grouped or individually classified."

Mrs. Gordon produced a letter which Mrs. Renelli had written to a Willowbrook doctor in 1961, thanking him for treating her daughter for an ailment. She told the doctor, "God bless you."

Mrs. Renelli testified that supervisors had told her that her daughter was "abusive" and "hard to handle." Mrs. Renelli said she "couldn't believe it" because her daughter had never been aggressive.

Under cross-examination, however, Mrs. Renelli admitted that her daughter had had temper tantrums while at home, and that it became too difficult for her to care for her daughter at home. But this, she insisted, was because her daughter had become a "24-hour-a-day job."

## IN PRIVATE SCHOOL

Mrs. Renelli admitted she was unable to toilet train Adrienne or to teach her to dress or speak. She also admitted that a private school where she had sent Adrienne for a year asked her to withdraw Adrienne because it believed it could no longer help her. She also admitted a doctor told her that Adrienne was in need of custodial care.

Mrs. Renelli, who has a second daughter 10 years older than Adrienne, said she and her husband turned to Willowbrook on the recommendation of a doctor.

At first, she said, she resisted putting her child in an institution. "I didn't feel that they would take care of her as well as I could," she said.

Mrs. Renelli said she was reluctant to question school personnel about her daughter's

injuries for fear of reprisal to her child. She said this was a common attitude of parents at Willowbrook.

Mrs. Renelli said she had her daughter committed to Willowbrook in the expectation that the school would teach and train her "whatever she was capable of," and that one day she would be able to take Adrienne back home.

Dr. Dybwad listed three points which he said would lift the school's minimal standard of care. These were: Break down patients into small groups so that constructive work could be carried out; create a "stimulating environment" such as in regard to feeding and improving personal hygiene and direct training methods to the specific inadequacies of each patient.

Titone ordered the hearing Sept. 1 in ruling on Biaggi's application for a wide-ranging public hearing into Willowbrook's operations. The judge however, limited the hearing to the injuries suffered by Adrienne and the treatment she received at the school.

Biaggi had initiated the action in Bronx Supreme Court, but it was shifted to Staten Island because of a jurisdictional question.

Titone yesterday continued in effect an order originally handed down by a Bronx judge, requiring the school to keep Adrienne in the school's medical building and to take all steps to provide for her health and safety.

It was unclear yesterday precisely what action Titone could take if he should rule in the petitioners' favor, other than to require Mental Hygiene Department officials to comply with any infractions of the Mental Hygiene Law. The judge already has precluded himself from rulings that would require the expending of taxpayers money, such as ordering the implementation of new programs.

The hearing continues today.