

Judge takes hearing to Willowbrook

By RAYMOND A. WITTEK

A judge yesterday paid what he hoped would be an unexpected visit to four buildings at Willowbrook State School where a 22-year-old mentally retarded woman had been assigned for varying periods during the past 12 years.

Supreme Court Justice Vito J. Titone ordered the visit in connection with a hearing on allegations by Mr. and Mrs. John Renelli of the Bronx that their daughter, Adrienne, has been mistreated and regressed since entering the institution because of the failure of the state Mental Hygiene Department to provide her with adequate training and habilitation programs.

Three of the buildings inspected yesterday reportedly have been redecorated in recent months in the wake of disclosures first made public in the Advance on oppressive and shocking conditions at the school. The school's surgical-medical unit also was visited.

Mr. and Mrs. Renelli's attorney, Bronx Congressman Mario Biaggi, described what he saw yesterday in comparison to his observations on other occasions as "a complete metamorphosis." He added, "I hope it stays this way."

SURFACES CHANGES

Robert L. Feldt of the Legal Aid Society, who accompanied the party as an observer, described the new look as "cosmetics." However, Feldt insisted that the paint, decorations and scrubbing still could not hide the basic reforms which are needed at the school, such as training, educational and habilitation programs. Feldt is among the attorneys involved in a class action involving Willowbrook that is pending in Brooklyn Federal Court.

The buildings, for the most part, appeared scrubbed and clean. Most patients appeared without footwear, but all had clothing.

Most sleeping areas appeared crowded to some observers, but all beds had clean sheets and in one building there were plaid bedspreads.

The bedspreads sparked an exchange of opinions between Dr. William Bronston, a clinical physician at the school for two and one-half years, and a ward attendant in Building 27. The attendant said she has had the bedspreads for the past six months. Dr. Bronston said he had never seen them before.

Later, the 35-year-old physician, a leader in efforts to bring about reforms at the school, said he believed that the court visit had been expected by school authorities for some time.

Last March, Dr. Bronston had an "unsatisfactory performance" notation placed in his record by superiors because of what he said was a list of grievances he had filed against the institution in the hope of obtaining improvements.

One of the patients in the hospital-surgical building was Adrienne. Titone has directed that she remain in the building for the present for safety, health and welfare reasons.

Dr. Bronston described Adrienne, who has an intelligence quotient of 28, as a "multiply handicapped, profoundly retarded patient." He said she suffered brain damage at birth and has cerebral palsy. She also is an epileptic.

Nevertheless, Dr. Bronston insisted, upon returning from the court visit to the school, that in his "professional view" Adrienne, with proper care and training could within five years be in a shelter workshop performing productive tasks. At present she appears to be incapable of the slightest task, including feeding herself, although experts say she does have the ability to be trained.

GAMES, TV

An abundance of dolls, and balls being tossed among residents and court personnel, were seen yesterday. Persons who have visited Willowbrook on numerous other occasions said the balls are a recent innovation. There were TV sets in every building, and each ward and cafeteria had at least three attendants.

Dr. Bronston, at the judge's direction, kept up a running commentary, although the group was accompanied by Dr. Max Werner, a school staff member.

On one occasion, Dr. Bronston said there are no devices to control the heat of water. Water comes out of shower heads either "ice cold" or "steam" hot, Dr. Bronston said. As a consequence, many patients go without showers.

There were indications, despite testimony, that there were training and educational attempts to evaluate patients.

In Adrienne's case, however, attendants questioned again bore out yesterday what has been already testified — that whatever training she received at the school was that which she obtained from attendants at their convenience.

CLAIMED BEATINGS

Mr. and Mrs. Renelli have claimed that their daughter has been injured at least 100 times since arriving at Willowbrook. Terms such as "beaten" and "assault" have been used in connection with the injuries.

Witnesses, including Dr. Bronston, have attributed the injuries mostly to falls, as a result of epileptic seizures.

For the first time, Dr. Bronston yesterday indicated in testimony he believed that something other than a fall had caused a "terrific head injury" which Adrienne suffered last Feb. 25 while a patient in Building 23. The injury was so severe it caused her eyes to close.

As in most other similar incidents involving Adrienne, Dr. Bronston said ward workers told him she had fallen and struck her head following a seizure. "In my opinion, it could not have been caused by a single blow or fall," the doctor said.

Dr. Bronston was the "house" physician in some of the buildings in which Adrienne was a resident for about four months. He said he covered between two and six buildings with a daily resident population ranging between 400 and 1,200.

The hearing is due to resume Tuesday in Brooklyn, where Titone will be sitting during October.