

Ward of the state:

Willie Summers-- a tough scene to make

by Anne Fanciullo

Brought to Bronx Children's Court as a "disruptive and immature" boy, Willie Summers never had a chance.

In the years before the recent expose of conditions at Willowbrook, it was common practice for courts to send normally intelligent juvenile offenders and "hard to handle" adolescents to state schools theoretically set aside for the mentally retarded.

Willie, then age 11, was sent to Willowbrook State School.

He is 20 now, his memory gutted with deprivation, insecurity and a lack of acceptance as an intelligent, capable person. Branded a troublemaker, a thief and an ex-con, Willie's past is dotted with beatings, isolation and constant doses of tranquilizers.

Yet despite all this, Willie has not lost his pride.

"I want to be something," he says, almost pleading. "I want a trade and a job. I want my own apartment and maybe in a few years, my own business. I'm tired of being in and out of jail."

Dubbed a moron by psychologists, Willie at Willowbrook was looked up to by the younger patients, respected by his peers, and regarded as an "amiable child" by his former teachers. Nonetheless, he has been a thorn in the side of ward attendants, security guards and administrators who both fear and hate his rebelliousness.

So burdensome was Willie Summers that in 1970, after 7 years of residence at Willowbrook, he was suddenly dumped on the street without money, a job, or a place to live.

Since then he has taken up "residence" at Riker's Island for a total of 14 months for crimes related to his presence on the grounds of Willowbrook, "the only place I know." Unable to obtain employment because of his criminal history, Willie Summers has remained "on the street" where Willowbrook left him two years ago -- wearing borrowed clothing, eating stolen food and using a bench in the ferry terminal as

a bed.

One of six children of a derelict father and an alcoholic mother, Willie was referred from Bellevue to Willowbrook after psychiatric examination revealed that the boy was suffering from possible brain damage and emotional deprivation.

Suspended from school in the Bronx for disruptive behavior and allegedly stealing school supplies, Willie was recommended for placement on the basis of his "defective" intelligence and poor home situation.

"They took me and my brother Sammy (who was also a Willowbrook resident) away from my parents because they used to fight a lot," says Willie, in a subdued voice. "I stayed at Bellevue for six months. Then I went straight to building 5, and my brother went to building 19.

"On my record they said I was immature, and they thought that because I was slow in catching on, I was retarded. They could have put me in a home or a shelter where I could have tried to elevate myself to a higher state ... but they put me here (Willowbrook) instead."

At Willowbrook, Willie was at the head of his class, and aside from some occasional slumps in interest and cooperation, his teachers agree that Willie has great potential. "Willie is fun - loving and outgoing," said one.

His popularity in class seesaws with his behavior toward the group ... it's hard to stay angry at Willie."

In reading and math, his work was usually above normal, while in the classroom, some teachers thought him to be hyperactive, "a show-off" and an attention-getter. "I liked school okay," says Willie. "I got into trouble with some of the teachers because they thought they were big shots."

Williamay Thompson, a recreation therapist at Willowbrook, explains that "Willie is a leader. The group follows him, and when he comes back to Willowbrook he has to look big in their eyes. Willie's a strong, tall boy, who looks older than his age. He is intelligent -- and he knows it, and he wants to let you know it."

Willie's pride and his identification with the "tough guy" image gained for him both friends and enemies at Willowbrook.

"The one thing I couldn't stand was when an employee would beat on a patient, or try to steal his money," recalls Willie. "The employees didn't like it when somebody showed the patients understanding and sat down and talked with them. They think that because that kid is a little 'off' they can hurt him."

"The employees knew that I didn't like to see anybody get beat with a stick. So I took beatings for the patients -- I fought for the patients. When I was smaller here I got beaten with a stick. But now, they wouldn't come near me with a stick because they know I can fight back."

While he was at Willowbrook, Willie and some other boys formed a gang called the "Marvelettes." "It was just a way of making sure that the patients had clothes on," explains Willie. "Sometimes when it was snowing they would go to the dining room without coats or shoes ... they weren't getting proper medical attention either, and they came to me more than anybody else when they had trouble."

Willie's temper sometimes gets the best of him, but he maintains that he does not fight unless he is provoked. "I fight back because they [the attendants] come to your face and say 'I'm going to take this bat and break your head if you don't stay in line.' If they

would come and approach me in a mannerly way -- that's fine. But they always approached me like a savage."

"I know I have a bad temper," says Willie, "and I'm trying to control it. But if I know something isn't right, that's when I blow."

Having come to Willowbrook with a reputation for theft and misconduct, Willie's usurping of the attendant's authority and his leadership among the other patients hurt his standing at the institution.

Staff members at Willowbrook recount numerous episodes involving money and valuables supposedly stolen from employees by Willie. Whether these charges are true -- or whether Willie was used as a scapegoat, by vengeful attendants, for acts of

theft committed by others -- can never be fully proven.

When accused of such acts, Willie's denial of them furthered his reputation as a "good liar," so that his truthfulness in any situation was always doubted.

Willie continued to fight, and admittedly came to rely a bit too frequently on physical violence to solve his problems. His fighting and rabble-rousing did not go unpunished.

"To punish me, they would put me into seclusion -- in a little room all alone -- for two weeks at a time," he recalls. "Other times they put a gown on me or took my privileges away."

One source notes that Willie was so resistant to the seclusion room, that he actually broke the door down and had to be subdued with drugs.

"They gave me 250 milligrams of thiorazine four times a day," recalls Willie. "Then they raised the dosage so that I was getting 350 milligrams four times a day. But I still watched over the patients -- I still kept on fighting."

When Willie reached age 17, people within Willowbrook opted for his discharge on "community status" a whole year before most other patients are released from the institution. Because of his poor conduct record and con-

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tinued immaturity, the request was postponed until the following year, when suddenly Willie found himself on the outside looking in.

It was felt by the processing committee, which reviews the pending discharge of a patient, that Willie was basically "a good boy" and that since he was not retarded, he should be discharged and placed with the Bureau of Child Welfare and the Department of Vocational Rehabilitation for evaluation and job training.

Willie had never received any visitors while a patient, except once when his mother came and wanted to take him home for the weekend. When permission was denied because she was living in a furnished room and not her own apartment, Willie's mother never returned to visit her son.

When Willie was released from Willowbrook, a family type atmosphere was recommended. Willie was placed on "family care." He was to reside in a private home with four other boys, and a married couple to supervise. When plans were underway for Willie to be trained as a key punch operator, things seemed to be taking a turn for the better.

Placed on Family Care on August 7th, 1970, a program which lasts for usually 2-3 years, Willie was suddenly discharged from the program

on August 20th of that year. Amidst reports that he had stolen a record player and had been uncooperative while in the care of the family, Willowbrook completely washed its hands of Willie Summers.

Willie is understandably bitter, and he views his sudden discharge as a deliberate attempt on the part of the administration to rid themselves of the boy they could not force to submit to the system.

"There was no problem living in the group home," says Willie. "I was just discharged too fast. I hadn't even begun to adjust to living in the community. You start to see new faces, different places. It's hard to adjust to certain things."

Faced with no income and no home, Willie was put on public assistance and placed in the Christmas Tree Inn, a South Shore rooming house noted for its hazardous conditions and equally hazardous clientele.

Willie received welfare intermittently and managed to hold down a job as a short order cook and a porter. Asked why he did not remain in either of those positions, Willie explained that everytime he secured a job, and then came back to visit friends at Willowbrook, he would be arrested for an assortment of crimes.

Willie feels that he is being unduly persecuted by the security guards at the institu-

tion. "Why can't I come up here? All the other ex-patients come, but they restrict me. They know I'm a troublemaker. They could see me sitting here doing nothing and they'll come and say they saw me doing such and such."

Numerous run-ins with the law have caused Willie to be incarcerated seven times since his release from Willowbrook in late 1970. "Every single arrest for me was at Willowbrook. Out in the community, I don't get arrested because I don't get into trouble. I've developed a reputation so that every time something happens around here (Willowbrook), they come looking for me."

Willie was recently released from the Riker's Island prison. "They said I robbed a truck of \$180 worth of stuff. I just happened to be standing near it...I did four months for that."

In another instance, Willie was accused of arson at the facility. "That wasn't arson," he states. "I broke into the kitchen to get somewhere to sleep because it was raining and I had nowhere to go. I looked around to see if there was anything to eat, and I happened to put a paper in a garbage can, and it must have caught fire."

These acts and others are flatly denied by Willie who says simply, "I'm not going to admit that I did it."

In any event, those who have worked with Willie put aside the question of his guilt or innocence and argue that it is the responsibility of the institution to see to it that Willie is psychologically treated before release. If the institution fails to provide this service, they argue, the individual should not be held responsible.

"I don't want the patients who are getting out now to go through the same thing I did," says Willie. "To me, it seemed that they just threw me out. They said, 'Do this on your own, we don't want you

here.' When they put you out they don't give you any knowledge about what it's going to be like and what you have to do to survive. So you learn to survive any way you can. But you can't survive without money. And if you don't have money you're going to rip off anybody in order to survive."

Willie's latest return to Willowbrook last week brought the usual reception of security guards with clubs ordering Willie off the premises.

"I was sitting in the gym listening to records, and they came in and told me that I was going out to the stationhouse," Willie says. "I told them they had to be crazy. I saw them coming at me with clubs so I got a pipe for defense."

When asked why he returns to a place he knows will bring only trouble, Willie said, "I was here for seven years, I grew up here. I don't know anyone on the outside."

Mrs. Thompson claims that because Willie has just been released from prison and since he has no family and no skill, "he has to come back here. The patients here sneak him food or they manage to get him into the dormitories to sleep for the night."

"Getting him a home is the first order of business," said one social worker who has taken up Willie's cause. "We're going to try and get

him a temporary address so that he can qualify for emergency public assistance while we're trying to get him job training."

Attempts to find Willie a job ended last year when the Job Corps rejected Willie's application for training -- despite the fact that he passed the exam.

"At the Job Corps," says Willie, "they're supposed to rehabilitate you and give you a trade. You get a diploma and you come out with a certain amount of learning. They shouldn't be worried about whether you've been in jail or not. People look at me like I'm a menace to society. Like I'm a criminal or an ex-con. I know I'm going to have to face this for the rest of my life."

On his own, Willie tried the Manpower Offices in St. George, to no avail, and was even hoping to get a job on the grounds of Willowbrook.

"There was an application in to have me reinstated at Willowbrook as a resident," he says, "but it was denied. They even told me not to bother applying

for a job here because if anything happens, I'd be the first to be blamed."

Referring to his numerous court appearances, Willie says, "After a while, they didn't know what to do with me. They wanted to send me to Beacon State - but that's just more confinement. They put me in a program called Independence House but that wasn't beneficial to me because there were no job training facilities."

Willie feels that because of the constant harassment by guards, and a lack of direction in his life, he is being oppressed by society.

"Sometimes I'd be at Riker's Island and feel like committing suicide," he says. "I'd rather have somebody kill me than take my freedom away. That's my most valuable possession after my brother."

To Willie, perhaps the most damaging effect of his life at Willowbrook was the lack of understanding and the harsh treatment he received from his keepers. Optimistic and resolute to mend his past mistakes, Willie speaks of an officer he met at Riker's Island. "He told me that in mutual understanding, as much respect is given as is taken."

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