

Willowbrook — a haunting question raised

By RAYMOND A. WITTEK

Are there any potential Helen Kellers among Willowbrook State School's mentally retarded residents?

This haunting question was raised yesterday by the chairman of Syracuse University's special education department at the conclusion of a Supreme Court hearing to assist attorneys in the

preparation of orders that will comply with the earlier decision of Supreme Court Justice Vito J. Titone in the case of a 22-year-old profoundly retarded Bronx woman, Adrienne Renelli.

Burton Blatt, a professor at the university, evoked the name of Helen Keller as an example of how the medical world can sometimes err in making a diagnosis.

"I can cite case after case where retardation has been proved wrong," said Blatt, under cross-examination by Assistant State Attorney General Judith Gordon.

The late Miss Keller was left deaf and blind at the age of 19 months because of illness. Despite her handicaps, she went on to win fame as an author, lecturer and pioneer on behalf of the handicapped. Until a

special teacher was found, her parents had all but given up hope for her development.

Last January, following a prolonged hearing, Titone ruled that the state Mental Hygiene Department is required to provide a specific program for the care and treatment of Miss Renelli who, the judge said, had been "warehoused," at Willowbrook for 12 years.

It became clear through Blatt's testimony yesterday that any programs that are furnished Miss Renelli must also necessarily be provided other residents.

Attorneys for both sides may submit orders, and the judge will then sign the one which he feels most nearly complies with his decision. The order will embody the guidelines which the Mental Hygiene Department will be required to follow to

adhere to the judge's ruling. The hearing was held to determine what specific program of care and treatment Miss Renelli should receive. Blatt himself raised the question of how whatever programs Miss Renelli receives must be extended to other residents, a point on which the judge appeared to agree.

"It isn't enough to talk about

her (Miss Renelli's) needs," Blatt said. "You can't separate her from the others in her group . . ." Blatt conceded it will not be "easy" to rehabilitate Miss Renelli, and said he considered a program recommended in earlier testimony by a representative of the Mental Hygiene Department as "reasonable." In addition to being retarded,

Miss Renelli is also an epileptic and damage to her central nervous system contributes to her problem. She also has only what Blatt called a "marginal," attentive span, seconds or minutes in which she can concentrate on a subject.

Among Blatt's recommendations in regard to a program for Miss Renelli was greater utilization of her family to assist in her development. He called on the school to provide them with reports and consultations on a regular basis.

It was the absence of such information to parents that helped spark widespread publicity on shocking conditions at the school, first reported in the Advance.

Blatt also recommended that the staff hold staff meetings at regular intervals to discuss the programs and progress of residents, as well as calling in periodically non-school experts in various matters as consultants. Mrs. Gordon brought

out that the school now has a consultant program

Blatt's recommendations were coupled with other programs that involved language, socializing and dealing with behavioral problems.

The action on behalf of Miss Renelli was brought through her parents by Congressman Mario Biaggi, the mayoral candidate. Biaggi was not present yesterday, but the hearing was carried out by members of his law firm.