

A Palsied Willowbrook Grad Yearns to Rejoin the World

By JEAN CRAFTON

He had the lean firmness of youth, a dark-eyed young man with a stylishly thick mustache, a shock of rich brown hair and an easy smile. Casual in his blue jeans and brown sweater, he leaned into the black fabric of the sofa, now and then laughing good-naturedly although his speech came in the slow, painful syllables of cerebral palsy.

"Being in Willowbrook and outside is two different things," Bernard Carabello was saying. "In Willowbrook, you got people waiting on you."

"Being on the outside is a struggle," he reflected. "You got responsibilities. . . ."

Left at Willowbrook

Bernard doesn't remember much about that day more than 20 years ago when he was taken to the admissions office at Willowbrook, the hospital for the mentally retarded, and deposited. He does remember being afraid and crying when his mother left.

The 4-year-old, like a lot of the youngsters at Willowbrook, had difficulty talking, walking and getting about. His words came out garbled and strained, his hands refused to do what he wanted them to do, he stumbled when he tried to walk.

People were just beginning to be aware of cerebral palsy back then. It was often automatically assumed that a child with Bernard's symptoms was mentally retarded.

IQ Test Above 70

Even after IQ tests showed Bernard was testing above 70—the arbitrary cutoff point for children to be accepted at Willowbrook or turned away—Bernard remained.

He stayed there for 18 years—until his fellow inmates and the personnel there became all the family he knew.

Then a lot of things started happening to him.

He had become a grown man. It was time to start thinking about some way for him to make his own way in the world. The social worker assigned to him at Willowbrook contacted United Cerebral Palsy about enrolling Bernard in a new workshop program the organization was getting started on Staten Island.

Accepted at Workshop

Bernard was accepted for the workshop as soon as it opened.

Before that happened, however, Willowbrook became big news. And that was when Bernard met Geraldo Rivera, the television figure.

"Bernard was prominent in the story," recalled Norma Scott, the director of vocational services for United Cerebral Palsy. In the weeks following the publicized scandal over conditions at Willowbrook, Mrs. Scott said, "Bernard was in the middle of Willowbrook's internal trouble."

The young man who never had received much attention at Willowbrook because there were so many youngsters competing for attention there, suddenly experienced the heady feeling of being a TV celebrity.

Rivera's story about how Bernard's problem was cerebral palsy and not ordinary mental retardation was played over local television, making it sound as though Willowbrook had made a huge mistake in diagnosing the youngster's ailment. Bernard formed a lasting attachment for Rivera.

Problem Not Mental

"It was quite right that Bernard's big problem was not mental," Mrs. Scott said. She explained that because of appeals from Bernard's social worker, UCP agreed to accept Bernard for a developmental program in operation on Staten Island although the workshop facility still had not opened.

"While he tested at borderline intelligence," Mrs. Scott went on, "his major problem was really cerebral palsy. And he was educable," she said firmly. "Another major problem was the fact that he had been institutionalized for most of his life."

It was in February of 1972

that Bernard's younger brother, David Carabello, "checked him out" of Willowbrook for a weekend. "We refused to bring him back," 20-year-old David said.

Everyone on Camera

The UCP officials are still talking about how it was when Bernard first came to the workshop.

"It was the first or second day he was there," recalled Norman Kimball, director of public relations and fund raising for the organization. "The workshop

people looked up and there were television cameras all over the place."

Bernard's friend, Geraldo Rivera, had come to follow up on the sensational coverage of the boy who had lived at Willowbrook by mistake for nearly two decades.

Because of all the publicity about Bernard, United Cerebral Palsy officials said the organization "bent over backward" trying to accommodate Bernard.

Because he wanted to read, they allowed him to enroll in both the "developmental" program and the vocational workshop.

Improving But Impatient

But as Mrs. Scott explained, "Bernard was not happy. From a vocational point of view, Bernard's productivity was not good. He was improving, but he was impatient."

Bernard said he did not like the workshop "because it only paid 20 cents an hour . . . and I was still getting public assistance. I got \$17 every two weeks because I can't go so fast."

"If he had been capable of making minimum wage—\$1.85 an hour, we would not have accepted him in the workshop program but we would have tried to place him in industry," Mrs. Scott said.

In any event, on June 9, 1972, "Bernard told us he was no longer interested in the workshop program," Mrs. Scott said. Bernard agreed with her own opinion about what bothered him was that "he was completely overwhelmed with all the attention he was getting."

Sees Brother "Used"

David Carabello said his brother had been "used by some people who profited more" from the sensationalism of his story than did Bernard. "no one thought about the psychological problem involved with bringing him back into the community," he said.

Miss Scott said that in her organization, "We never close a case. Bernard can come back at any time."

Bernard said his brother had urged him to do just that. "But I'm not going to do that," Bernard said, recalling the workshop. "I didn't like it."

And, in the tone of a man delivering the clinching argument, he said: "Geraldo doesn't think I should go back to the workshop."

Reply From Geraldo

Reached at his office, Rivera said he never told Bernard to leave the workshop but because Bernard's speed was so hampered by his affliction "we just never considered the workshop as a possibility for him."

Rivera also conceded that the publicity may have been a detriment to Bernard's schooling. "I really feel like a negligent parent," he said, adding that he intended to try to help Bernard find a job.

Meanwhile, the young man who longs for the life of others his age sits idle, gazing out at a world geared for people who can make their tongues and feet and hands do what they want them to do.

"I would like a job with minimum wage—just like you and everybody else," he said wistfully, his face contorting in one of the muscular spasms characteristic of the palsied.