

Now a college grad, he finds job gone at Willowbrook

By JOAN MOTYKA

Lautha Gray III is a court order casualty caught in the middle of Willowbrook efforts to comply with a federal court ruling.

As a recent Wagner College graduate with a degree in elementary education, he has been reclassified out of the classroom into Willowbrook wards.

Not the typical degree holder unable to get the job he is qualified for, Gray is a 12-year Willowbrook State School employe. He spent eight of those years as a ward attendant and the other four as a teacher assistant.

In February, he received a year-long education leave and after getting his diploma this month, went to claim the teaching job he had been verbally assured.

He found that the job item had been reclassified and that the only available position was a ward attendant.

Part of the April 10 federal court order states that Willowbrook must increase the number of ward attendants, physicians, physical therapists, nurses and recreation staffers.

Willowbrook, to date, has been unable to meet the order and as a compliance measure, has reclassified all vacant positions into court-ordered jobs, with attendant items as high priority.

If Willowbrook employes leave their jobs for some reason, the job items will be reclassified into attendant items. For example, if a psychologist quits, another will not be hired in place; instead an attendant vacancy will be filled.

"Because of this emergency, because of measures we have to take to meet the goals that the court has set for us, we

seem to have lost latitude and maneuvering space in hiring," Willowbrook director, Dr. Miodrag Ristich, claimed.

"Because of the court order, we were told to make the best use of what we had there."

For Lautha Gray, this means the best use of his teacher training and experience must be cast aside for the time being. He claims this is another instance of Willowbrook employes being demoralized by the administration.

Willowbrook administrators are caught in the bind of having to comply with the court order and trying, at the same time, to accommodate resident and employe needs. While the two are not mutually exclusive, they are caught in a snag in the Lautha Gray case.

Gray, 36, who claims he has "given most of his life to mentally retarded children," was graduated at Wagner with a "better than C average," according to Barney Jensen, college registrar. His final term grades averaged B-minus.

While most education majors are required to do student teaching, this was waived in Gray's case because of his Willowbrook experience.

Mrs. Athena Puryear, his educational supervisor during three of his teacher assistant years at Willowbrook, called his work, "very good, almost excellent," and claimed he was "a very good employe."

Gray himself speaks of teaching mentally retarded children with a dedication and sincerity that are now mixed with frustration over his inability to get the job.

He is also getting discouraged. When he tried to appeal Willowbrook's refusal to hire him as a teacher, he encountered "a run-around" on the part of administrators.

Dr. Ristich, he claims, was inaccessible to him, although he tried reaching him in his office and at his home on the Willowbrook grounds. Other administrators claimed there were just no vacancies, though he had been promised one.

It was not until he contacted the Willowbrook Benevolent Society that he learned he was caught as a casualty in the court case.

Ristich, who was contacted by the Advance and the Urban League, claimed that "In ward service, we have a need for college degree people in supervisory levels," and added that Gray could advance upward from his ward attendant job.

Gray wants to teach, however. According to Brian McNamara, a Willowbrook teacher and president of the Mental Health Educator's Association at Willowbrook, there is a need of additional teachers even though they are not required under court order.

"There are kids who should be in school but who aren't because there is a lack of teachers," he claimed.

Currently there are about 1,000 students at Willowbrook, taught by about 104 teachers and 35 to 40 teacher assistants, McNamara estimated.

At the end of each school year, he claimed there was an average turnover rate of 12 to 15 teachers. For each teacher who leaves and is not replaced, 10 to 12 students are dropped from the program.

In addition to the natural turnover, there is currently a threat at Willowbrook of extending the work day for teachers as a means of achieving improved programs for the residents.

If this goes through, a large majority of Willowbrook teachers will quit, according to McNamara. If the

reclassification process continues, the school program at the institution will be in serious trouble.

The state Mental Hygiene Educators Association has come out against the move.

"The extension of their (the teachers') day to eight hours, which no teacher in any public school system works, would be such a drastic regression in employment conditions that the state would lose many of their teachers and would be able to attract only the least qualified, professionally, in the future," a MHEA statement read.

"This tactic would not serve to improve the living conditions of the residents of our institutions but would actually decrease the quality of services being rendered."

The MHEA proposes that the emphasis be placed on quality, not quantity, in the restructuring of state services to the mentally retarded.

The threatened job action on the part of Willowbrook teachers only acerbates the problems at the institution. It is another instance of the employe-administrator conflict.

Critics claim that Willowbrook administrators are negatively interpreting the federal court order and ignoring the positive approach that the court order was meant to produce.

"Lautha Gray is a victim of the manipulation of the court order," McNamara stated.

In Gray's case, financial issues arise in addition to interpretation of the order.

As a grade 7 attendant, he made a bi-weekly net salary of \$242.28. As a grade 10 teacher assistant, he netted \$267.72. If he were to be hired as a teacher, his salary would increase.

Since the job is unavailable, he must return to a grade 7 salary, lower than the salary he made before getting his elementary education degree from Wagner College.

Gray has not yet accepted the job as ward attendant; he is "thinking it over." Although he was told that if he accepted the job, "there's a possibility" that he would be hired as a teacher in September, he claims that his "knowledge of Willowbrook State School indicates that the administrators have reneged on word-of-mouth before."

His plans are not yet definite, but he is hoping and working for the teaching job. If this does not work out, he claims he would like to run a foster home for mentally retarded children.

"I've given most of my life to mentally retarded children," he says.