

# Willowbrook 'mother' beams success story

By JOAN MOTYKA

"There's a place for me somewhere and I'm going to find that spot."

As Carmen speaks, her finely-sculpted faces intense, her dark eyes penetrating. Her reddish-blond hair is braided, and pinned back, and in one thin, delicately-boned hand, she holds a cigarette.

"To me life is hard. You can struggle sometimes for so long, and it might take you years to get what you want."

At 24, Carmen is beginning a life so different from anything she has ever known before. This is her third month away from Willowbrook State School, having been institutionalized for 15 years.

"I want to know if I can make it on my own. I want to try. I want to be proud of myself," she said.

## HER OWN

Carmen was the child of a broken home, placed in Willowbrook in 1957. Like many others in institutions across the nation, she was placed in a state school for the mentally retarded, not because she was retarded, but because there was nowhere else for her to go.

Today, there is a place and a new family.

Through Willowbrook's foster care program, she has found a niche with the McFields family of 301 Westervelt Ave., New Brighton.

Mrs. McFields is mom, a woman who has raised six of her own children and looks as young as her own oldest daughter.

She now has her own room, a delight for the young woman who cherishes her privacy — a young woman who lived in large institution wards for 15 years.

Carmen now works as a housekeeper at the State School and considers it only a job.

Many times, when people are released from Willowbrook after having been there for years, they cling to it, Carmen explains. There friends are there, it is secure, and it is often all they have ever known.

## HAPPY NOW

"I'm happy I'm out, but I was afraid to go out," Carmen says. "It's a big world out there and it's hard to handle. I used to try to avoid it."

"Living at Willowbrook isn't hard. You have everything there you can ask for. You get a roof over your head, three meals a day. There are movies and dances. It didn't bother me, except for the crowds all the time."

As she speaks, across the dining room table is Mrs. McFields, listening and nodding. Their eyes keep meeting and in the moments when Carmen hesitates, there is a murmur of reassurance or a smile. Carmen admits it has always been difficult for her to express her feelings, but now it is becoming a little easier.

"I want her to think like a person 'out there,' to try to make it," Mrs. McFields says.

"I don't want her to think Willowbrook, but to think Carmen." She looks across the table to the young woman, and there is gentleness mixed with determination on her face.

"Don't hold on to Willowbrook as a crutch," she says softly.

Also around the table is Mrs. Millie Nitto, her young son, and two of her foster children, Paul, 35, and Mary, 60. They are all friends.

## SUCCESS STORY

As Carmen speaks, Mrs. Nitto interjects her own reassurances. She is excited about Carmen, and her own memories color the hopes she has for her young friend.

Twenty-two years ago, Mrs. Nitto worked at Willowbrook as an attendant for nine months. Four years ago, with two children of her own, a husband and a father to care for, she decided to become a foster mother for a Willowbrook resident.

A 19-year-old woman joined the Nitto family, a young woman who, social workers said, would be back in Willowbrook in two months. She had been hard to handle in the institution, and they expected her

to be even worst on the outside.

But she had taken to the Nitto family, and with time, became part of it. She is working now, married to another ex-Willowbrook resident, living in an apartment with two of her own children and a foster child from the State School. Mrs. Nitto beams as she recounts her "success story," and her pride is swept to Carmen and Mrs. McFields.

"Carmen's going to make it,"

Mrs. Nitto says. "If Willowbrook people are placed in homes, and if the foster parents consider them as part of their own families, then they can be helped and they can really live."

"I do for my foster children as I do for my own children. They follow the rules we set up at home, but they've got the freedom to live normally. They didn't live before."

In the Nitto home, there is Mr. and Mrs. Nitto, Mrs. Nitto's father, two children, and four adult ex-residents of Willowbrook.

Mary, at 60, had been institutionalized for over 25 years, and in family care for 10 years. But now, in her second year in the Nitto home, she says she never wants to leave.

"We're all happy here. We're happy with the children around, and we do things with the family all of us."

Her voice is soft, and an enthusiasm overwhelms it as she speaks of all the little things that make up family living, the things she cannot take for granted because they never come easy to her.

As she speaks of helping around the house, going to the movies with one of the children, or even spending an evening watching television with the family, she seems to be strongly aware of the difference between institutionalization and family living.

## SIGNIFICANT

It is that difference which leaders in the field of mental health and mental retardation have discovered to be so significant.

Ten years ago, institutional care was considered best for the mentally retarded and the mentally and physically handicapped. As time went on, the evils of institutionalization became obvious and the care provided in large facilities could not be compared to care in a family home setting, experts felt.

However, the stigma attached to mental retardation could not be easily erased from peoples' minds. Often, parents who had been advised 10 years earlier to place their children in institutions were unwilling to take their children home again. In the cases of children being institutionalized because they came from broken homes, there was nowhere to return.

The key concept in the field of normalization: Individuals thrive best in an environment that is "normal" to their growth, where each individual is seen as a separate entity whose growth cannot be compared to that of anyone else.

Institutions, experts began to feel, could not adequately provide the normal environment, since people were "lumped" together and did not receive the intense personal care they required.

As pressures were placed on institutions to send their residents into the community, foster homes became an important aspect of the scheme.

## NEED LICENSES

At Willowbrook, the Community Services Unit supervises the placement of residents into family care homes. Most people interested in becoming foster parents prefer to take children, and CSU has run into difficulty placing severely retarded or multiply handicapped residents and adult men.

People willing to become

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foster parents are interviewed by CSU staffers and must get their homes inspected and licensed.

For each ex-resident in the home, the foster parents receive \$195 a month to cover maintenance, food, laundry and board. The ex-resident receives \$17 a month for personal use. Clothing is supplied by Willowbrook. If the necessary clothing is not available, a New York State standard voucher is issued. There is no actual money involved, but it allows for the purchase of items of clothing in certain stores. Some \$300 a year is provided per resident for clothing.

Often, Willowbrook employees become foster care parents. Mrs. Ina Sullivan, a team leader in the central habilitative services unit, recently brought an 8-year-old Downs Syndrome girl into her home.

The child had been institutionalized her entire life. At Willowbrook, she was one of many children who never had visitors. She does not speak.

Mrs. Sullivan is the mother of three teen-age sons and had always wanted a daughter. Employed at Willowbrook since February, she had decided to spend her lunch hours with a child who never had visitors. Her decision to bring the child home in foster care was "more emotional than anything else" and her family was excited about it.

The child had come home with Mrs. Sullivan for day visits before moving in, but the first few days of actually living there, of being part of the family, were telling.

"She had spent her time in Willowbrook sitting against the wall, playing with her shoe laces," Mrs. Sullivan said.

#### SMILES APPEAR

The little girl who had rarely smiled at the school, began to smile, Mrs. Sullivan said. She had never been exposed to animals before, but was now petting the two dogs in the Sullivan house.

Used to hard Willowbrook floors, she found it difficult to walk on the grass or carpets. She kept feeling textures — of drapes, furniture and walls.

As each child is placed in foster care, there must be written consent of the child's own parents. In Mrs. Sullivan's case, this held up placement for weeks. And since the child was not allowed to visit overnight until the placement was made, Mrs. Sullivan said the delay stretched while the child remained in the school.

"In placing her, Willowbrook was more concerned with following rules than it should have been. Rules are important but they shouldn't be more important than people. The institution is just so big it gets in the way," Mrs. Sullivan said.

The program of decentralization — making Willowbrook into smaller, more manageable units — is the major thrust behind the placement of Willowbrook residents into the community.

(Last of five articles.)