

For a boy at Willowbrook, the door has been closed

By CAROLYN DeLUCA

According to an ancient allegory, once you've seen the light, you can never again be satisfied in the cave.

For a 17-year-old we'll call Brian, a resident of Willowbrook for 10 years, the enlightenment was provided, but the cave remains his home. The adjustment is the problem.

His glimpse of a brighter environment came through the efforts of a devoted volunteer. She showed Brian the light as it flooded the beaches in Florida, as it was reflected off national monuments in the capital, and as it shone during several weekend tours to Canada, New England and other areas.

This long-time volunteer has given Brian new clothes, swim lessons, and 10 years of a stable, loving relationship that he may never have known without her. But it was never easy on Brian, or on the staff, when he had to return to the institution after these visits.

When Mrs. Cowles (a pseudonym) went to Willowbrook recently to pick up the youth for swim classes at the YMCA, she was told abruptly by a member of the staff of Building 5 that "he is not allowed to have visitors."

At first, she reported that the staff said he was being punished for rowdy behavior, but later she was presented with a notice, signed by the building head, or "team leader," stating that the boy's

leaves and visits were indefinitely terminated.

Through a letter to Jerry Gavin the president of the Benevolent Society for Retarded Children, the staff informed Mrs. Cowles that her affection for, and attention to, the youth were making it difficult for him to adjust to living in the institution.

Mrs. Cowles' relationship with Brian began 10 years ago when she began volunteer work with young boys at Willowbrook. For ten years she has taken him out on a regular basis, and has taken him on numerous tours and vacations.

During the past few months, Mrs. Cowles' time with Brian was restricted by the team which administers the building in which Brian resides. It is her understanding that this is due to a decision by the staff that the youth was having too many privileges.

In a letter sent to the team leader, Thomas Cataneo, Gavin wrote:

"There is no such thing as too many privileges for any unfortunate person who, for reasons beyond his control, must live at Willowbrook! The institution, God help us, is run for the benefits of the residents, not for the convenience of the staff."

According to a letter from Dr. Miodrag Ristich, director of the institution, "some members of the team, including the attendants, feel that Mrs. Cowles is a very bad influence on Brian."

The team reported to Dr. Ristich that when Brian returned from visits with the volunteer, he was "unfriendly, he doesn't socialize with others... and wants his own way."

Gavin in a letter to the director questioned this curtailment of the boy's privileges, saying, "If Brian's family wished to take him to the beach during July and to the YMCA for swimming on Friday nights during the summer, we assume that there would be no questions on the part of your staff."

"We cannot understand why any resident should be denied these pleasures because they are provided by a volunteer friend rather than his family," he added.

GREAT CONTRAST

No matter who takes Brian, or any other resident, out of the institution, the contrast between what is seen on these trips and an environment that a state advisory council termed "depressing and dehumanizing", is bound to elicit a reaction.

When questioned about the matter, the team leader said that he did not give Mrs. Cowles any reason for terminating the visits with Brian. He said it was a "clinical matter that cannot be discussed." Similarly, Dr. Ristich would give no reasons for this decision.

Mrs. Cowles, who is shocked and very dismayed with this sudden announcement, maintains that, "All I wanted to do for him was open his eyes to what was outside the institution."

The volunteer, who holds a full-time clerical job, resides on the Island with her husband. She reports that she received the original permission to be an "unofficial guardian" for Brian from the late Dr. Hammond, director of Willowbrook for eight years.

Also a volunteer in the women's wards, Mrs. Cowles is the grandmother of a boy Brian's age — his chronological age, that is.

Brian's mental age is estimated by the volunteer at about 12. He was sent to the institution, according to a letter to Gavin from Dr. Ristich, because he was found to be "a sullen, stubborn, disobedient boy who had frequent temper tantrums and made poor school progress." He was 7 years old at the time.

An attempt to reunite the youth with his natural mother three years ago failed after he spent six months at home. The mother requested that he be returned to Willowbrook because she could no longer handle him; she said he had struck her, was disobedient and that she wanted no part of him, according to Dr. Ristich.

Mrs. Cowles reported that she has never had a disciplinary problem with the boy.

"Although he cried a lot in the beginning, now he is a young gentleman that I'm proud to take places," she stated.