

# 2 women, lost in Manhattan, returned to Willowbrook

By ROBERT MIRALDI

A massive New Year's Eve vigil ended early yesterday morning when two severely retarded residents of Willowbrook Developmental Center, lost in Manhattan since Monday, were found—safe and sound—at Bellvue Hospital.

A citywide search, with a big assist from the New York media, ended about 1:30 a.m. yesterday morning when Willowbrook officials identified the two women, Katherine Beatty, 51, and Antoinette Bittel, 55, as the missing residents.

The two women, who both have IQs between 10 and 15, were returned to Willowbrook shortly after noon yesterday. A state security car whizzed the frightened, but unharmed women back to the Island campus.

As the black state car pulled up in front of Willowbrook's Building 22, shouts of "They're here, they're here" could be heard from open windows. The two women stepped out of the car's back seat, and proceeded up the steps.

Both has smiles from ear to ear. They had returned to Willowbrook—their home for the past 20 years.

For Willowbrook officials and staff it was the end of a bizarre, frightening three days. "I have to admit," said Joyce Libra, the harried public information officer for Willowbrook, "it was a scary experience."

The story begins Monday morning when 35 Willowbrook residents visit Madison Square Garden's Felt Forum to view a 10:30 showing of "Pinocchio." The trip was sponsored by the Willowbrook Benevolent Society.

The show ended at 1:30 p.m.

"We left the auditorium and were coming down the stairs into the Forum lobby," recalled an attendant, who asked not to be identified. "There was the normal chaos in the lobby so we immediately took a head count."

Miss Bittel and Miss Beatty could not be found.

"We told security at the Garden. We checked the bathrooms...the auditorium. We looked everywhere for two hours," the attendant said.

"I'm not quite sure how it happened, but it just did."

The remainder of the Willowbrook delegation was ushered onto a waiting chartered bus and sent back to Staten Island.

The police of the Midtown Precinct and the Bureau of Missing Persons were then notified.

"This is really bad," the attendant said Tuesday, "when officials had no idea where the two women were or where they had spent Monday evening."

Miss Beatty, 5-2, 160 pounds, has been a Willowbrook resident since 1953. Before that she was institutionalized in a Wisconsin hospital beginning in 1929.

The 5-4, 155-pound Miss Bittel, who is taking medication to prevent epileptic seizures, has resided at Willowbrook since 1950. She had previously lived at Letchworth Developmental Center, in Spring Valley, N.Y. for an undetermined length of time.

Neither woman can talk. Both respond to their last names, but neither has any identification.

"They can only communicate in the most rudimentary manner," Miss Libra said Tuesday afternoon.

"Everybody here is damn shook," said one Willowbrook official, asking not to be identified.

From the time the two women were separated from their group in Madison Square Garden on Monday to the time they were admitted to Bellevue's emergency treatment unit—about 8 p.m. last night—it is unclear where they were. "We probably will never know," Miss Libra said yesterday.

Miss Beatty apparently wandered into the 7th Precinct between midnight and 2 a.m. Tuesday. The precinct is at 19 Pitt St., near the Williamsburgh Bridge, about three miles from Madison Square Garden.

Police Officer Michael Manente and Detective Vincent Ciacciarelli tried to talk to and feed Miss Beatty. She refused. Finally, at 7:10 p.m. she was brought by ambulance to Bellevue.

Miss Bittel apparently wandered into Downtown-Beekman Hospital, which is near City Hall and also about two miles from the Garden. A spokesman at Beekman, however, said he had no record of when or how she entered the hospital.

At 8 p.m. she was brought by ambulance to Bellevue.

Willowbrook officials learned of their presence at Bellevue thanks to the New York media. Local television and radio stations broadcast descriptions Tuesday night.

While watching television on New Year's Eve, Police Officer Patricia Harris saw Miss Bittel's photograph on a news broadcast and recalled that she had seen a similar looking woman unable to answer questions put to her at Bellevue Hospital earlier that day.

Officer Harris notified Willowbrook by phone, and staff members rushed to Manhattan to identify the duo.

"I don't think anybody is at fault," said one of the six attendants who had accompanied the group to the "Pinocchio" performance.

As a result of the unprecedented incident, Dr. Rangasmy Naratajan, a deputy director at the center, has ordered that all residents be given name tags when they leave the Willowbrook campus.

It was "not definite" yesterday, according to Miss Libra, if there would be a further investigation.