

Operation Exodus head leaves Willowbrook

By ROBERT MIRALDI

Albert Robidoux, chief of community services at Willowbrook Developmental Center, is leaving the quantity of the Staten Island institution for the retarded for the quality of a smaller upstate center.

The man who for the past two years has guided Operation Exodus at Willowbrook will begin work today at Wilton (N.Y.) Developmental Center, a 341-bed school near Saratoga Springs.

"It's really been a horribly demanding two years here," Robidoux said in a recent interview. "The pressure has just never let up. I really haven't had a day off.

"What happens is that it pulls so much out of you, you start to defend all the time, you narrow your perspective... right now I feel good about what we've accomplished."

But, Robidoux adds, "I've been wanting to move my family back to the country. Personally, I have been feeling the pressures. The job at Willowbrook will take a couple of more years of optimal effort.

"I don't know if I can do that," Robidoux, 45, said as his wife, Jackie, and two children, Timmy, 13, and Lisa, 8, prepared to move off the Willowbrook grounds to Wilton.

The "job" to which Robidoux refers is perhaps the most vital for the future of Willowbrook—the placement of its residents in the community and the concurrent development of community facilities for the retarded.

The success or failure of community service, some observers feel, will dictate the future of Willowbrook.

With Robidoux leaving, the job has been given to Mrs.

Priscilla Sarino, a former social worker at Willowbrook, who most recently was chief of service at Brooklyn Developmental Center.

Mrs. Sarino declined to comment in depth about the future of community services at Willowbrook, saying that after less than a week on the job she could not talk authoritatively.

Mrs. Sarino will have a tough act to follow, however.

First, Robidoux's guidance of Operation Exodus, the funneling of over 1,600 Willowbrook residents to community facilities and other institutions, has generally been considered a success.

Second, the caliber of residents left at Willowbrook, lower IQ with a higher level of retardation, will make community placement more difficult.

Third, the development of community facilities, like halfway houses, is expected to meet community roadblocks in an era when many communities feel that Staten Island is being used as a dumping ground for various handicapped, mentally ill and mentally retarded citizens.

Thus far, Robidoux points to cooperation from Staten Island residents as a highlight of his two-year tenure at Willowbrook. "The community has been good. The schools have been responsive and some agencies have been helpful.

"Complaints from and about the community have been far and few between," Robidoux says.

If not the community, then what has made the two years at Willowbrook so "horribly demanding" for Robidoux?

There are three levels of demand, Robidoux explains, that have taxed him and his family for two years.

•First, the job is a 24-hour one, night and day, weekday, weekend, holiday. The residents deserve that from each employe, he says.

Robidoux's wife found that the "total Willowbrook" environment, where "the whole world revolves" around life at the institution, tended to make family life harder than normal.

"Living on the grounds makes it difficult," Mrs. Robidoux says. At first, the city school bus wouldn't come on the grounds to pick up the Robidoux children. And to the day the Robidoux family left Willowbrook, neighborhood children would not come to the grounds to play with Timmy or Lisa.

"The Willowbrook residents treated the kids with more respect and dignity than the community," Robidoux said. The residents, in fact, were "protective" of the kids, he said. "They were really concerned."

•Second, Robidoux has for two years been fighting the Willowbrook administration, the bureaucracy. In the case of the Department of Mental Hygiene, Robidoux has been fighting the world's largest, most entrenched mental health bureaucracy.

Robidoux feels he has been the "kind of administrator other administrators don't like" because he "makes waves." The waves, Robidoux feels, however, have been constructive ones.

In the beginning, 1972, Robidoux's job when he came from Bangor, Maine, to Willowbrook was to help transform an overcrowded, 5,000-population institution into the 2,878-bed center it is today.

Robidoux did not plan Operation Exodus, but he had to expedite it. He found it a

"high priority with Albany, but a low priority with other directors." Albany, and the other directors, had to be pushed.

Some directors, Robidoux feels, blamed Willowbrook for much of the pressure and criticism to which the Department of Mental Hygiene has been subjected. As for Robidoux, he feels that Willowbrook does have more problems than other state centers and that its administration is "more chaotic" than he would have originally expected.

After the pressure of Operation Exodus subsided, foster care and community placement became Robidoux's focus. He worked to expand his community service staff from seven in 1972 to its present 29. In fact, it was only in September that an official community service unit was set up.

In two years Robidoux has helped in the present placement of about 240 residents in family care. And he has fought for other placements that have been vetoed, that have been legally denied.

Robidoux tells the story of one 12-year-old Staten Island girl, whose name he cannot reveal. She comes from an upper-middleclass Island family. She was committed to Willowbrook when she was 5, but "she never should have been there," Robidoux says.

He has attempted to place her in a foster home, but her real parents have objected. They want her at Willowbrook and have fought in the courts to keep her there. "It makes me sick," Robidoux says.

"She

"She doesn't belong in an institution."

Robidoux, however, would not say that many residents of

Willowbrook, if any at all, belong in the institution. "Philosophically," he says, "all residents could be out."

He feels the placements in nursing homes and health related facilities and the development of at least five halfway houses on Staten Island will have to take place if Willowbrook is to continue to reduce its population.

•Third, Robidoux's dedication has not allowed him just to deal with community services because, he feels, that is only part of the plight of the retarded. You must deal with life in the institution, he feels, you must fight that, too.

Robidoux feels that his job within the institution has got to deal with "fighting for the rights of the retarded." He cites the attempted blockage of a halfway house for the retarded at 200 Tysen St., New Brighton, as a denial of the rights of the retarded.

Within the mental health field, Robidoux explains, there are conservatives who feel that the institution is the best place for the retarded, a closed, strict, tight institution, Robidoux says he is on the opposite pole.

"Call me a humanist," he says, calling for the least restrictive environment possible for the retarded. Big institutions are restrictive and oppressive, he says. And that is why Wilton appeals to him.

It will afford him the chance to deal with quality placement of the retarded, in the best possible foster care atmosphere. It will allow him to work on the details that the quantity of Willowbrook denies.

For Robidoux it will probably still be a 24-hour job. His wife says that at Willowbrook, people were always able to find him, probably because he didn't want to avoid anyone... the press, the public, the residents, the employees.

"Any problem has to be dealt with immediately," he says, "not tomorrow, but today, right now."

"The view has always been that they (the retarded) are sub-human. But if we can teach our kids," he says, "that you can't single out the retarded and let humanness be equated with intelligence..."

"We must get out of that..."

Robidoux's voice trails off, and you sense that at Wilton Developmental Center he will be fighting for the rights of the retarded 24 hours a day.

*Page 2 of
2 pages*