

New Brighton murder suspect 'never belonged in institution'

By ROBERT MIRALDI

The ex-Willowbrook Developmental Center resident accused of murdering fellow worker and center resident Raul Cordero was released from the troubled center for the retarded six years ago and, officials now conclude, there was never any reason for him to have been institutionalized in the first place.

Officials yesterday described the accused man, Eugene Allen, 24, of 444 Jersey St., New Brighton, as "a person who did not belong in an institution" and as someone who would "absolutely not" be institutionalized today.

Acting Willowbrook Director Dr. Stanley Slawinski said that Allen, who police say bludgeoned Cordero to death about 2:30 a.m. New Year's Day, was a "borderline retardate" whose records indicate retarded development but no physical defects.

"He was not up to par with his peers and he was retarded scholastically," Dr. Slawinski said of Allen. But, he added, in the six years Allen resided at Willowbrook he showed "no unusual or violent" behavior.

Allen's records indicated that once he damaged a door and a wall at Willowbrook. "Nothing glaring, though," Slawinski said. Some reports labeled Allen as "stubborn and mischievous," while others said he was "tidy and helpful around the ward."

Allen was admitted to Willowbrook on Jan. 21, 1963, when he was 12. Institutionalization had been recommended by a family psychiatrist who had examined Allen in 1962. He was discharged Nov. 7, 1969.

Allen stood mute yesterday as he was arraigned in Criminal Court before Judge Royal S. Radin. He was held without bail, pending a hearing Feb. 2.

The murder in the New Brighton community of a Willowbrook resident by an ex-resident is "certain to add fuel to the fire of community

residents' already up in arms over the placement of the retarded and the mentally ill into foster care and small group homes.

Presently there are 352 ex-Willowbrook residents living in the Staten Island community. One hundred and forty live alone or with family members—like Allen, who after his discharge lived in New Brighton. Approximately 212 ex-residents live in foster care homes.

Officials estimate that another 6,300 retarded Staten Islanders, most never institutionalized, are presently residing in Island neighborhoods.

The officials also estimate that eventually Staten Island will have to accommodate 25 to 30 group homes for its own retarded population. Two are presently in the process of development, both in New Brighton.

Community placement of the retarded in recent years has been a most controversial, costly and troublesome problem for the state Department of Mental Hygiene, under court order to reduce the population of Willowbrook from 2,650 to 250 by 1981.

Observers feared yesterday that community groups might seize upon the Cordero slaying as evidence that community placement is a danger and threat. Physical harm, sexual abuse and falling property values are the three most often cited fears of anti-community placement factions.

"Community living for the retarded," Slawinski said in response to a question, "is the proper vehicle. History has proven that institutionalization can lead to further retardation."

The slaying of Cordero, Slawinski said, "has nothing to do with retardation. Social problems at work are the cause of this incident."

"People will fudge and relate the incident to Willowbrook, but this is not related to the institution."

Mrs. Beatrice Victor, chairman of the Staten Island Regional Retardation and Disabilities Council and herself active in the development of a group home in New Brighton, called the incident "most regrettable."

"We must study the entire picture with all the facts," she said. This type of incident, she said, could "happen to any person."

Robert Karlin, chairman of Community Board 2, which has been integrally involved in the development of group homes for the retarded, said that while "any violent crime is upsetting and deplorable...there is absolutely no evidence whatever to indicate that mentally retarded persons commit more crimes or worse crimes than any other segments of our population."

"In fact, the opposite is true," Karlin said.

"There is ample proof, however, that the best way to make happy, productive citizens of the developmentally disabled is to assimilate them into society, preferably in their home communities," he added.

According to police, Cordero and Allen were at a party on New Year's Eve in Allen's apartment, drinking for several hours, when a fight began. Allen allegedly bludgeoned Cordero to death with a car bumper jack.

Cordero, 30, a Willowbrook resident for 13 years, was slated to be released from the center within two to four weeks, according to Slawinski.

As part of a federal court-supervised consent decree, Willowbrook has been ordered to make 200 community placements by April 30 in sites that "offer better settings." Slawinski said yesterday that the department is behind its original placement schedule.

Community placement has been the focus of a major dispute between the court-ap-

handicapped.

Dr. Rangasamy Natarajan, clinical director at Willowbrook, says: "It is baloney to think that all residents will be fit for community living."

"Some cannot be moved into the community. To think they are going to be normal citizens is pure fantasy. The best we can do is make them comfortable, help them develop as much as possible."

Dr. Natarajan says there 971 present residents in need of constant medical attention and 646 who, with a year of intensive training, could move into the community.