

Court-Ordered Winds of Change

Sweep Willowbrook



A young resident hugs a physical therapist after a session in one of Willowbrook's 27 residence buildings.

By PETER KIHSS

Arlene looked half asleep. But when summoned, she sat down at a miniature xylophone. First she was asked to clap the two rhythm sticks—"One and two and three"—and she did that in time. Then, "Play red." She struck the red musical key, and on following commands played the black and green keys.

Arlene is a retarded child who exemplifies the increased new efforts being made at the controversial Willowbrook Developmental Center on Staten Island to develop each resident to his full potential.

Since 1972, the state facility for the mentally retarded has been the target of a Federal Court suit by parents and civil liberties lawyers, who termed it at the time a place of horror, where people "deteriorated both mentally and physically."

Nowadays, residents and staff members seem to be trying harder. There were 2,600 staff members two or three years ago; now there are 4,350. Dr. Levester Cannon, Willowbrook's director, estimates that, given retirements and departures, perhaps 3,000 are new.

Many of the staff members are young, with more of the hope and idealism of youth. There's more working "one on one" with the 2,500 residents—down from 5,341 when the court case began in 1972. There were still 2,900 residents there when a con-

sent agreement in April 1975 stipulated a reduction to 250, serving only Staten Islanders, in 1981.

Buildings are brighter with fresh paint, curtains on windows, rugs, sofas, new chairs. Wardrobes for each resident divide the former 50-bed wards into groups of sometimes as small as eight. Regular beds have replaced many old hospital cots.

There is new clothing, and just about everybody wears it instead of the hospital gowns of a couple of years ago—when clothes could not even be kept on some. New equipment includes 300 wheelchairs, many individually adapted.

There is still discontent over the rate of progress. One parent, James C. Camen, called the changes mostly "cosmetic." He said the placement of the wardrobes prevented attendants from seeing some residents harass others.

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