

Private palsy group may handle some Willowbrook cases

By SYDNEY FREEDBERG

Late in the fall of 1956, Elizabeth Tracy was born into a doctor's promise of early death. Of the two most prized gifts of mankind — good health and happiness — she had neither. Elizabeth was pale and impossibly vulnerable at birth. Her eyes, luminously green as mint jelly, were always kindled with tears.

For months, Elizabeth (not her real name) remained secluded in the sterile room of a Manhattan hospital, clinging precariously to life. But because of a lack of oxygen at birth, her brain and limbs would be damaged always and she'd continue to weep for comfort.

Though Elizabeth eventually made it home to Rosebank, that didn't work for the Tracys. The seizures and feelings of sadness grew worse; each voluntary act Elizabeth tried was marred by intense involuntary movement.

By the time she was four, she'd fallen well behind and could not eat, walk or toilet herself. So, in the winter of 1960, with some words about "curiosities" and "chances," Elizabeth was set aside in Willowbrook, becoming one tarnished fixture in a tent of thousands.

Deemed retarded, difficult, temperamental and self-abusive, there she remained for 15 years, emaciated, sometimes curled fetally on a ward floor, but most often just ignored.

The gloominess of her case, oddly, led to a chance for something better, and in 1975 Elizabeth and 49 others, all judged to be among the most physically and mentally disadvantaged at Willowbrook, were chosen to take part in a new private residential program, to be operated by the state United Cerebral Palsy Association as a model for the public Willowbrook Developmental Center.

It was the first facility of its kind. Although the private palsy group had operated day programs for the physical-

ly handicapped throughout the country, never before had the organization received state funds to attempt a residence for an institutionalized population.

The Nina Eaton Center, located in Building D of the South Beach Psychiatric Center, opened June 16, 1975, when 50 of the "worst possible cases," director Fred Stein recalls, "were transported to us in little yellow school buses."

"We were shocked at what we saw," Stein says. Elizabeth and the others "were virtual unknowns, flat on their backs, bird fed and neglected for years. Never were they encouraged to use their limbs or to gain any degree of independence."

At once parents and advocates of the handicapped and mental health experts across the country dubbed the new residence "the center of hope," a dramatic proving ground against those who saw the disabled as a basket of vegetables.

Unlike Willowbrook, the privately run UCP center specialized in what Stein calls the "interdisciplinary team approach," where a therapist, for instance, could perform the tasks of workers in any number of fields. Stein sees this treatment approach as the most important factor in UCP's success.

When Elizabeth was transferred to the center, Stein explains, her programs, hand-tailored to meet her capabilities, were necessarily on the most basic level. Training in infant stimulation, toileting and self-feeding was followed by involvement outside the building in a sheltered workshop experience in Queens.

And now, there is Elizabeth, a smiling, strapping young woman of 21, asking a visitor to come see her new apartment in the Coney Island section of Brooklyn, and then proudly showing her