

## Willowbrook director 'settled'

By SYDNEY FREEDBERG

Three weeks ago, a series of tremors began to shake the unstable little town of Willowbrook Developmental Center with the persistence of a minor earthquake — minor but threatening to escalate into a full-blown explosion.

And if it weren't for a small, bookish woman with neat wire-framed glasses who sat at the director's chair like a pilot ready at the controls of a bomber, they might have.

The Willowbrook directorship, after all, has been called the third toughest job in America and it came to Elin Marie Howe at a particularly inopportune moment.

The massive home for the retarded —

right at the center of everyone's attention, Miss Howe points out — was going through extraordinary changes. Just that day, the state Department of Mental Hygiene had surrendered some buildings with 640 residents to the United Cerebral Palsy Association.

The union representing an estimated 4,000 institutional workers was up in arms, threatening to strike; the parents were outraged by conditions in the buildings; the federal court wasn't helping much, and the director, Dr. Levester Cannon, had resigned that day, leaving Willowbrook in a vacuum.

So along comes Elin Marie Howe, at 30 less experienced than most, a woman, too, rifling in to fill the gap with a touch of New England gracefulness and steely cool aloofness from turmoil.



Elin Marie Howe

And everyone seems to like her, a fact she thinks important since "there is no way we're ever going to get anything done if there is constant fighting among us."

During the takeover days, Miss Howe made her presence known to workers by paying sneak visits to Willowbrook buildings at odd hours of the night. "If I saw something wrong," she explained, "I'd tell the offender and the problem was generally straightened out."

She says she worked long hours "to make sure the transition worked well," to see to it that employee unrest was minimized and patient care up to par.

And as Willowbrook's deputy director for administration for more than a year, she claims she fell into the job naturally and was as prepared for the confusion as she could have been.

"But it was a difficult time anyway," she acknowledges, reminding one quickly, however, that "we're settling down now, and since our population has been reduced, there is now a tremendous potential to expand on some of the good things that are happening here."

She is enjoying her work so much (it's the type of business you either love or can't work in, she explains) that she'll probably apply to be permanent facility director, which would make her the first woman and the youngest person to hold the Willowbrook post.

"I want to make a contribution on a larger scale," says Miss Howe, who lives alone in Grasmere in a newly purchased home. "When I first came to Willowbrook in 1973 (as part of a central Department of Mental Hygiene task force), I felt differently, though; it was hard for me to understand.

"I guess I'd never really seen retarded individuals before. Oh, you know, I was familiar with mildly and moderately retarded persons, but I'd never seen a spastic, or a deaf-blind, someone with multiple handicaps.

Page 1  
of 2