



Linda Polidori, left, and Marge Colonna, visitors at Willowbrook's open house, receive a map of the grounds and a summary of the center's goals from Mrs. Paul Carannante and Maria Thompson, right, SERVE volunteers. Nettie Evans, background right, a worker, looks on.

S.I. Advance Photo by Irving Silverstein

Open house at Willowbrook is an eye-opening experience

By SYDNEY FREEDBERG

At first, for Jonathan Terrison, a 28-year-old teacher living in Brooklyn, the Willowbrook Developmental Center was a place he cared little to know.

He had read about it in the papers for years. He was depressed by what he'd heard.

But yesterday's open house, Terrison said, helped him to understand, and a dim awareness gleaned from newspaper accounts became an uneasiness which, in turn, marked a change in his thoughts about the retarded.

"One way of putting it, I guess," the

tall, blond man said upon entering a Willowbrook building, the second of the day. "is that I was a white, middle-class man, one who did not very easily fit into this kind of (Willowbrook) society.

"But when you go there, you realize they're people, too, and you realize the injustice of it all is close at hand."

Maybe as a consequence of yesterday — when every Willowbrook living unit was open, when bands blared forth marching music and the sun smiled down on hundreds of visitors and non-visitors alike — Terrison and the others will take up their particular ef-

forts against the injustice.

At least that's what the institution's officials hope — that they educated some people who had refused to accept the mentally retarded because of lack of understanding or fear of the unknown.

Or that by visiting the 384-acre Willowbrook on a sunny Sunday, one or two or maybe more unaware citizens began to discover that "unjust" in the world is noticing the existence of a caste system that places retarded people at the bottom.

Terrison said it happened to him when

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Visiting their son, Jay, during an open house at Willowbrook Developmental Center are Mr. and Mrs. Eugene Kimberg of the Bronx with their daughter, Yvette, and a friend, Jeff Reish. S.I. Advance Photo by Irving Silverstein

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he walked into Building 14, a facility now operated by the United Cerebral Palsy Association housing severely retarded and disabled children.

When he walked up to a little boy in a wheelchair, offering his hand, the two smiled. Terrison turned and said: "Institutions seem to strip people like him of their dignity.

"He needs limitless compassion," the teacher added, obviously in some pain over the sight of the little boy. "People who won't accept people like that have betrayed human life."

Other "curious" visitors to Willowbrook expressed different reactions, ranging from faint glimmers to full recognition. Unfortunately, however, few seemed to come from Staten Island, which has already rejected a group home because of admitted community opposition to the retarded.

A young woman from the Bronx who attends LaGuardia Community College came to Willowbrook because she said she needed information about a state institution for an abnormal psychology course she is taking.

She was noticed staring at a young and weak disabled girl, seized with curiosity. Suddenly the student grew quite restless and turned her back.

Asked why she did that, the woman responded that she was not outraged. She said she simply wanted to go away, and she did.

Administrators and staff at Willowbrook, including the director of the 1,700-bed facility, Elin M. Howe, as well as UCP's associate director of programming, Meredith Harris, were on hand to help awaken people to the problems of retardation.

There was a skillfully worded summary passed out to visitors, which said:

"Imagine living on an island and never seeing a subway or riding a bus. Never seeing the Thanksgiving Day parade. Never running to the corner store for candy. Never seeing firemen in action. Never eating in a restaurant.

"Willowbrook Developmental Center has residents who have never had these opportunities. They had been living on an island of isolation, and we now must build a bridge to the community."

The summary continues, "Institutions, in effect, became stone fortresses where the retarded were locked up, never to be seen or heard of again."

But after much trial and error with warehousing, degrading care, state officials have grown. "We have come to the realization that retarded persons, regardless of the degree of handicapping conditions, are capable of physical, intellectual, emotional and social growth."

Those words, taken from a 1975 court

order establishing the rights of the retarded, might as well be engraved in stone.

"We look forward to the day when children and adults can be re-integrated into the community. Our goal is to enable retarded persons to live as normal a life as can be..."

About 250 persons attended yesterday's open house, and although many had connections to retarded people, some did not.

For the formerly unaware, there were the kinds of moments one could not be proud of. Yet if one forgot them, one would be even more ashamed.

And for the aware — those who had grown up with retarded children or sisters or cousins — there was the hope that the community, which once cried out for change at Willowbrook, would now accept the same people they sought to help.

"People seem to block out things that are unpleasant," said Miriam Petersen of Oakwood, whose daughter has lived at Willowbrook for 16 years.

"This is the best time I've had at Willowbrook in 14 years," said Victor, a resident, of Building 32. "But guess what? I'm leaving soon, going to a group home in Brooklyn. That should be better."

"Hopefully they're changing, the people are changing," remarked Louis Francisco Nives, a 10-year-old visitor translating for his Spanish-speaking mother. "My son, maybe they've forgotten my son (a 14-year-old Willowbrook resident), but soon they will remember not to forget."

"My son," the Manhattan woman continued, her child translating, "doesn't understand, but he needs love and encouragement anyway, not people telling him he can't. And then he will."

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