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Willowbrook Chief Thinks She Can Fill the 'Hot Seat'

By MARY ENGELS

At 31, Elin Howe is the youngest director Willowbrook Developmental Center on Staten Island ever had.

"She is also the first woman to hold the post and the seventh director in almost as many years to assume the job that many call "the hot seat."

In recent years many have tried but few have stayed. Will Ms. Howe be a stayer?

"Well," she said in her office the other day, "I feel I've already made a long term commitment to stay on the Island by buying a house in Grasmere."

"And to be perfectly honest I like

Willowbrook. I know the job is a demanding one and there are goals that must be reached under the Willowbrook consent degree such as the reduction of the center's population to 250 residents by 1981. But if all the opposing factions approach it as a team effort I feel we can accomplish much.

"After all," said Ms. Howe, "we are all working for the same cause."

Her own forte, she declared, is "I'm a good organizer. One of the things I do well is to get people together to perform. I feel the name of the game is not how many skills you have. But how you can get others to do work and things for you."

The director's background is administrative. Previously the business officer in the Brooklyn Development Center, she first came to Willowbrook with then acting director Thomas Coughlin as part of his task force in 1976.

In 1977 she became deputy director of administration for the center and acting director last September.

At Willowbrook she is committed to two goals.

"The first," she said, "is to shift the population into the community."

Notes Goals

"Presently, we have 1,625 mental retardates at the center. There is much work to be done if we are to come near that 250 figure in a few years.

"Personally, I feel the community is a better setting where our residents can benefit and do better with more normalization.

"However, there is much to be accomplished in order for the community to accept our residents. I find myself spending a tremendous amount

of time in the various areas talking to groups from civic associations, planning boards, trying to make everyone realize that our residents are just like other kids only with different kinds of problems.

"Eventually," she said, "I'd like to see the residents located in the three community board areas in some six to eight hostels or group homes.

"Staten Island is slower than most in accepting this and our work is cut out for us," she added.

Recently a site for an office was chosen in Port Richmond only to be turned down by local residents.

"We are now looking at the old Pantry Pride supermarket on Forest Ave. and hope that is approved by Community Board 1," she said. "It would be used to handle case management as performed out of Willowbrook with members of our staff and social workers.

"It would be close to our residents already in the community and also provide aid for those we may not be reaching.

Programs Seen Necessary

"You can't really hope to make placement in communities unless you have programs for the retarded."

The director's second major concern is in maintaining a high level of care and improving care at Willowbrook itself.

"You can't neglect what's happening here," she said. "Unfortunately, employee morale is low. With the cutback in population, more and more are fearful of losing their jobs.

"I understand their concerns but we are working on the relocation of employees. When residents move into

the community we need them to help there.

"There is also a new Bronx Developmental Center which will need employees and hopefully some of ours may wish to go there.

"And, of course, we will always need help right here to keep up the good work."

Looks to Fewer Residents

"When I was at Brooklyn Developmental Center there were only 600 residents. It was much easier to manage and I think it will be the same here when Willowbrook has been cut to four or five buildings instead of the present 20-some-odd it has."

Among the programs Ms. Howe introduced since coming to the center is toilet training which involves training those who had no skill in that function or just some.

"I think it's very important if the residents are to go into the community and into community programs to have the basics," she said.

"The next program I'm hoping to develop is one dealing with residential eating skills and socializing habits. Some can eat by themselves. Others can't. The same with socializing."

Simple for Others

"All these may seem simple to those who know but they are major achievements for our residents.

"You know," she added, "there are many problems at Willowbrook but if you focus on one at a time then you simply can move on to the next.

"I don't expect to handle all of them in one year. I'm no Sir Galahad. But I've put a lot of time and energy into the place, and I continue to do more, the best way I can."



Elin Howe, net desk.