

Willowbrook: For the 'mayor,' it's his past, present and future

(Today's story on the former Willowbrook State School, the nationally known center for the retarded, is the fifth wonder in the Advance's series. "The Seven Wonders of Staten Island.")

By SYDNEY FREEDBERG

Anthony Menella is crisscrossing the lawns of the Staten Island Developmental Center clutching a peaked gray cap in one hand and an attache case in the

other. This is not a businessman's case, just an old vinyl lugabout with cracks and sags and about 45,000 miles of handling time.

It contains nearly all of Anthony Menella's worldly possessions: a few shirts, some trousers, a tie, things he has managed to collect since arriving at the Willowbrook institution May 27, 1958, his 20th birthday. And this little crown Anthony wears, it's not a formal derby but rather like the two-bit pieces worn
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"Mayor" Anthony Menella visits the institution's commissary in Building 3 often, sometimes advising visitors what to buy there. Rabbi Goldberg is with him at right.

S.I. Advance Photos by Frank J. Johns



Anthony Menella walks out of his private room in Building 32, about to begin a tour of the grounds. His quarters consist of a bed, sink, mirror and a poster of Disneyland taped to the wall.

S.I. Advance Photo by Frank J. Johns



Anthony Menella, with his attache case, stops on his daily rounds to have a word with Dr. Huo Cheng, chief of adult medicine at the Staten Island Developmental Center, and Chaplain Philip Goldberg.

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15 years ago by every small boy in the snow.

It's not winter, though, but a bright, yellow day, and here comes Anthony Menella now, going nowhere in particular, just skulking the sprawling grounds like he owns them and wearing his heels to lopsided slivers. He's directing the institution's traffic, and reporting a worker for loafing, and banishing a newspaper photographer, and being An-

How it began

Uncertainty clouded the institution's future. Here's how Willowbrook State School began:

□ 1938 - New York State, seeing need to relieve overcrowding in upstate institutions, slips through \$12 million land deal, gaining options to 382 acres of Willowbrook Park. When plans come to light, Islanders fight losing battle to block "asylum."

□ 1941 - First living units of state school completed.

□ 1942 - Buildings completed; christened Willowbrook State School, but war delays plans as U.S. leases facility as Army hospital, renaming it after Army Col. Paul Stacey Halloran.

□ 1945 - U.S. lease runs out, but it retains control despite protest from Gov. Thomas A. Dewey, a staunch proponent of the state school.

□ 1946 - Compromise pact reached, giving U.S. half of facility as VA hospital and returning rest to state.

□ 1947 - Twenty mentally retarded patients arrive from overcrowded upstate institutions, beginning steady wave of such transfers.

□ 1950 - U.S. announces plans to vacate. Islanders wage futile protest.

□ 1951 - Last vet leaves Halloran VA, and new era begins. More construction is coupled with steady transfers and admissions of patients with wide range of disabilities.

1954 - Willowbrook State School packs 3,400 patients despite state law limiting census to 3,000.

thony Menella, the man recognized almost uniformly among 3,300 employees and 2,200 residents as the mayor of the Staten Island Developmental Center for mentally-retarded people, or simply, the "king of the hill."

In Anthony Menella's world, Anthony Menella can tell a visitor about how, having lived here a "few" years (20, more precisely), no, he doesn't want to leave the institution, and how, yes, "they treat me good here," and how, no, he hasn't future plans, and how, yes, he likes things exactly the way they are.

Anthony Menella's world, the institution's world; in which people are shaped over time to be loyal, trusting soldiers of this big home that shelters and parents them; in which a kind of disrespect and routine ruled for so many years that New York State now vows to close the home; a large, isolated, impersonal place born of an era that carved separate homes, private worlds, for the "thousands of mentally and physically defective and feebleminded who would never become members of society," as former Gov. Thomas E. Dewey once wrote.

A place of contradictions where people of contradictions are made. Like Anthony Menella, who for a man of 40 has an extra impish look. His face is dark and has an olive tinge. He is short, pudgy and almost totally toothless, preferring to wear his dentures in his pocket. He is a special combination of wise-cracking toughness and vulnerability, a man full of puzzles, puzzles.

When he walks the grounds, Anthony Menella is assertive, almost meddlesome. But when he is made to think, the skin between Anthony Menella's eyes puckers. When he talks to strangers, he becomes somewhat anxious and melancholy. But when he talks to friends, he beams like the sunlight. When he sees a dog, Anthony Menella is off with a screech. And when he is on the *outside*, well, Anthony Manella has never really known the outside. He has lived in state institutions all his adult life and most of his childhood. It is here that he rules with smiling confidence.

Not surprisingly, Anthony doesn't see himself as retarded (his IQ is between 30 and 50), but as someone rather who happened here by fate. And as an old-timer who knows the turf, he perceives

the institution in a curiously gentle way, as a big commune, maybe, or a kind of happy-faces-everywhere reform school to which people are assigned (regardless of origin or handicap) when they are "acting up and bellyaching a little too much trouble and mishigos (Yiddish for craziness) for their parents," he explains.

And Anthony? "I tend to the helpless kids," he says, his eyes smiling broadly. "I take care of 'em all."

* * *

Anthony Menella, his shoulders rounded, slumps into a folding chair in a small office in Building 2, the hub of the institution, where he comes each day to help the rabbi, namely Chaplain Philip Goldberg. (Anthony is the rabbi's shadow, a kind of assistant rabbi. He polices both Sabbath services and masses, chewing out irreverent worshippers who talk during prayer.)

Sitting with Anthony Menella, one gets another glimpse of *his* world — where a person's hair is not so much cut as chopped; where his clothing, too, seems off kilter: the trousers are a bit rumpled; the jacket and cap are of the '60s; the points of the collar curl. For in institutions, people don't *choose* the clothes they wear: these are state clothes, on loan to people, or donated clothes, original owner unknown.

But Anthony Menella claims he loves his clothes — and his life. "They treat me good here," he says, breaking into a soft stutter of laughter. "So don't go knocking the place in your story."

What was it like in the "snakepit" days? he is asked. "That's a bunch of balony," Anthony says.

Were you ever beaten? "No." (Anthony, however, reportedly was beaten at the Wassaic State School, where he lived before coming to the Island.

Were employees at Willowbrook ever mean to you? he is asked. "Na. Employees treat me good here."

Talk of change makes Anthony Menella nervous. Several years ago, for instance, Anthony protested plans to have him transferred from a building housing lower-functioning people to Building 32, where he was promised a room of his own and off-grounds privileges. But he

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moved. And he loves it.

He doesn't like change and similarly-poo-h-poo-hs this new concept of community-based group homes, the alternative to institutions, where the retarded are now seen capable of more growth. "That's a bunch of baloney," he says.

Maybe you'd like a group home if you went? Anthony is half-asked, half-told. He shakes his head no and wrinkles his eyebrows.

Don't you want to get married and have a family some day? "Na," Anthony says. "Women stunad, capisce? (dizzy, understand?)"

Maybe you like Willowbrook so much because you're used to it? And you're the boss? "It's OK here," Anthony Menella says. "Better than most."

* * *

Anthony Menella's kingdom is a world of rolling hills and hollows, resembling vaguely a European chateaux; a closed world that spins and winds over 382 tree-lined acres dotted by some 40 buildings, most of them red-brick with slanting, wood-shingled roofs.

Anthony rises each day about 7, takes a shower, walks the grounds, heads to the barbershop to help with residents' haircuts, eats lunch, walks the grounds, goes to the rabbi's, eats dinner, goes to adult education class, walks the grounds, returns to his room, takes an-

other shower and goes to sleep. Monday is much like Tuesday and so on.

Rabbi Goldberg takes him home sometimes to see Anthony's parents in Brooklyn. But they are old people who can't care for him full-time.

So Anthony has become in a sense the institution's child, dependent on it for shelter, giving it loyalty in return.

Institution officials, meanwhile, realize that the goal is to prepare Anthony to live in Brooklyn, but fear that to cast him out after 20 years might be to send him into oblivion. And to illustrate the point they relate an old story about Anthony Menella whose authenticity was established by the leading participants. It's a story about an institution, a place now regarded as a mistake of the past, a world that is at once impersonal and harsh, but has moments more precious than our world. For at the institution, the little minds can be just like us — only more so:

It was half-light. A winter month, 1972. Anthony was walking the grounds when he spotted four workmen digging a hole.

"You're digging a hole," Anthony noted. "Why are you doing that?"

The workmen kept shoveling. Anthony tried to catch their attention with coughing grunts. "What's the hole for?" he grunted.

One of the workmen looked up at Men-

ella and in a toneless voice said: "Busted water main." Anthony peeked down, twisted his face in curiosity and with a ready and unpuzzled expression ordered the men to "Stop!"

"You're digging in the wrong place. Use your heads. Dig over here!" Anthony pointed to a spot about 100 yards away. "The break is there," he said.

The workmen snapped to attention, thinking Menella an official, and lifted their sweaty bodies from the hole. They limped over to the new site.

They dug a new hole — a very wide, deep one. A man wearing khaki pants and a foreman's hat approached.

"What the hell are you doing down there?" the foreman shouted. "Who the hell told you to dig there?"

The four workmen gazed about for Anthony. One picked up a shovel, ready to throw it.

The toothless man impersonating the official stood tall behind a nearby tree, casting smiles and waving impishly at the workmen who seemed very far away and very small in the half-light.

"I did it," Anthony probably was thinking to himself. "I fooled them."

"I thought they were retarded, and they thought I was the boss."

(First of three articles. Tomorrow: The snakepit.)

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