

The 'hellraisers' at Willowbrook were drugged and straitjacketed

In the fall of 1965 the late Sen. Robert F. Kennedy, responding to more than the imperatives of politics, became the first national leader who dared walk the wards of the Willowbrook State School. A week later Kennedy told a legislative committee of the glum stares of young children slipping into lifelong dependence.

One of those he described was a 15-year-old boy from Manhattan's Lower East Side named Bernard Carabello. A victim of cerebral palsy, Carabello had been mistakenly institutionalized a decade before the Kennedy visit. He was released Feb. 16, 1972, after tests showed he was not retarded.

By BERNARD CARABELLO
as told to
Sydney Freedberg

I live on Jersey St. now. I am lying in bed awake since 5 o'clock, my getting-up time for 18 years. Out of my bedroom window, I can see darkness turning into day.

I am a free man. I have an apartment with an eat-in kitchen, a few worn chairs and a new stereo. A full-time job with a group that protects the handicapped helps me pay my rent on time. I'm off the government rolls.

You may not think what I've got is much, but to me it's a palace. I'm still catching up on my lost years, but I can see daylight beyond the shadows.

I am a former resident of the Willowbrook State School on Staten Island. For 18 years I lived in the place like a fish on the hook.

I was what they called a "hellraiser." Teen-age hellraisers at Willowbrook got beaten, drugged, straitjacketed and secluded. Once I was thrown through a wall. When I fought with an attendant one time because she called me "animal," she gave me a shot of drugs, strapped on a straitjacket and threw me into the seclusion room at the back of Building 6.

I lost track of time in this room. It's a 7-by-10-foot box with a drop bulb, white walls and a locked door. The floor was covered with urine and cockroaches. If I hadn't stolen my clothing and hidden it under my pillow, I would have had none. No one came to see you in seclusion except when they brought you food. A per-

son died to go back to the ward even though there were 100 people jammed onto it.

Another time I got threatened with the sickroom at the back of Building 7 because I refused to tell a deputy administrator anything about my friend Dr. Wilkins. That was 1971. Dr. Mike Wilkins was raising hell, too, about conditions in the buildings. I had met him earlier in the year outside Building 21. I

was making a phone call to my mother. Dr. Wilkins came up and talked to me. He told me he didn't think I was retarded.

I thought the guy was a nut. Doctors at Willowbrook hardly ever came on the wards, let alone talk to the residents. Dr. Wilkins and I became friends. We began to exchange ideas on how to change Willowbrook, how to make it a

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Beds in tight ranks, no more than three inches between them, exemplifies overcrowding as late as 1975.
S.I. Advance Photo by Robert Parsons