



Leovarda Ruiz with her daughter, Maria, at apartment managed by United Cerebral Palsy on Upper West Side.

About New York

A Child Comes Home From Willowbrook

By ANNA QUINDLEN

About 24 years ago, just a few months after her first birthday, a little girl with tight brown curls named Maria Ruiz became the responsibility of the State of New York.

She went to live in a big brick building in the complex on Staten Island then called Willowbrook, and every Sunday her mother and father took a bus, a ferry and two more buses on the other side of the bay to visit her in a drab little waiting room. She was profoundly retarded, and rigid and ungainly from cerebral palsy, but she smiled a lot.

Her parents never visited the ward in which she lived and slept. Her mother, Leovarda, who had the same curly hair, sometimes had nightmares about her daughter, but she could not say exactly what they were or what they meant.

This month, after spending almost her entire life in institutions, Maria will be put into a van in her wheelchair and driven to her parents' home in the Bronx to live with Wilfredo and Leovarda Ruiz, who bore her but did not know what to do with her when she was a baby and they were young.

Maria has not changed very much since her parents decided to institutionalize her so many years ago, but the world in which she has not lived has changed a great deal. There was a great outcry about Willowbrook in particular and institutions in general; there were doctors who decided that retarded children would grow best with their parents, and parents who decided that, too.

And there is Maria, who is going home because of all those things, and because, at base, her parents never really stopped feeling that they had done something terribly wrong when they listened to the doctors and sent their firstborn away.

"We always think about this because we do not want to put her in," said Mrs. Ruiz, sitting knees to knees with her rag doll of a daughter and running her hands up and down the short calves in their pink knee socks. "I went to the doctor when she was four months, and I asked the doctor why she put her head to the back like that and why she does not have the movement of a child that age. The doctor told me she was lazy.

"But then, at seven months we take her to St. Vincent's, and then they find out that she is brain-damaged. The doctor told me that the best thing was to send her to Willowbrook. We don't want to send her over there, but then I get pregnant with my son and I can't have two children like that." And she folded her arms like a mother holding an infant.

Mrs. Ruiz's son grew up to become an electrical engineer, and her daughter grew up to be a baby, for while Maria's body has traveled through adolescence into adulthood, she wears the clothes of a small child — pink dress with lace collar, black Mary Janes, socks, diapers — and her mind has remained just about where it was when her parents took her to the doctors at St. Vincent's. She recognizes her mother, and she bounces up and down in her wheelchair when music is on the stereo, but she cannot walk or wash herself. She has learned one word in her life: "Papa."

Maria might have lived and died in an institution if the parents of some Willowbrook patients had not brought a class-action suit charging that the facility was overcrowded and inadequately staffed. In 1975, a Federal judge gave the state six years to change conditions, and one of the changes was Maria. She was