

# 'There's limit to human compassion'

## An inside view of the SIDC

*Editor's note: Ed Stanley, whose brother is a client at the Staten Island Developmental Center, feels reports focusing on the SIDC and care for the mentally deficient give an unrealistic account and offers this "inside view."*

**By ED STANLEY**

For years I've heard horror stories about the Staten Island Developmental Center (formerly Willowbrook State School). Cru-

sading newscasters or reporters, eager for a story, tell of inmates (now called "clients") running around naked, drugged into a stupor or sitting in pools of urine.

I've been told about overcrowding, sexual abuse, unsanitary conditions, outbreaks of serious illnesses, staffing problems and have even heard rumors about clients being used as experimental guinea pigs.

These stories have affected

me more than the average person, because I have a brother in the Staten Island Developmental Center. Frankly, I'm fed up with auditors, newscasters and so-called investigative reporters who broadcast "exposes" without the slightest knowledge of what it is like to care for a mentally deficient, yet physically capable person.

It is time the public got a more realistic view of the problems involved in caring for the

mentally retarded, but not from a reporter who has half an hour's worth of "experience."

I have a few horror stories of my own. We tried to keep my brother home. Imagine the mind of an 18-month-old baby in the body of a strapping adolescent — a "baby" who urinates in neighbors' yards, slaps sleeping family members in the face to wake them up, jumps out of a car in the middle of traffic, throws his sister's eyeglasses out the window, sets things on fire and attempts to throw his baby brother out the window.

Imagine other children living in the same household trying to lead normal lives — chasing a naked 11-year-old down the street or keeping him out of garbage pails.

We had padlocks on all the doors, including the infant's nursery. If there had been a fire, I could not have gotten to the baby in time. But the padlocks did not stop my brother, who climbed out of the window any-way.

We tried putting him in special classes. The teacher kept

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sending him home.

My mother hired a 6-foot, 300-pound football player to take my brother out twice a week, so she could have a brief respite. We siblings escaped temporarily by going to school. But there was really never any escape. Somebody had to watch him, chase him and try to stop him.

Luckily, my brother was not physically violent or malicious. But he was very strong and getting stronger. He wanted immediate, constant attention — and he would do anything to get it.

I remember neighbors yelling at us to "control" him. How? Threats? Physical punishment? If he were an animal, you could chain him up in the backyard. But what do you do to a human being?

Sending him to an institution was a last resort. It was probably the most difficult decision my parents ever had to make — a decision which surely contributed to my father's untimely death a year later. But it was a matter of whether or not to sacrifice everyone's health and safety for one who could not be reasoned with.

While visiting Willowbrook, I saw much of what the media

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paraded before the public. I saw patients running around unclothed. But I also saw them rip their own clothes off time and time again. They would rip off their clothes faster than the staff could dress them.

There were unsanitary conditions. What do you do when people defecate on the floor? How many times a day can you clean it up? As for infections, how do you keep a Band-Aid on someone who pulls out his stitches?

And of course, one of the biggest complaints was always inadequate staff. Who wants to work there? Employees either have to be humanitarians or people who cannot get jobs elsewhere. And even humanitarians have limits to their endurance. The staff turnover is, understandably, very rapid.

This is not to defend deliberate cruelty, ineptitude or neglect, nor is it to say that the

"crusaders" have not done any good.

They have helped to force the alleviation of overcrowding, they have helped many of the "borderline" cases to be educated and find homes in the community, and they have forced many administrators to "clean up their act."

Nor is it to criticize those parents who have chosen to sacrifice their lives to care for someone who is unfortunate enough to be mentally incapable of caring for himself.

But it is all too easy to criticize without ever having any knowledge of what it is like to deal with a problem. The crusaders and do-gooders who have all the answers should work in Staten Island Developmental Center for a week before writing their exposes. They would quickly find out that there is a limit to human compassion.



The entrance to the SIDC off Victory Boulevard.