

## A look back

# Willowbrook caught in national spotlight

By JULIE MACK  
Advance Staff Writer

When Michael Wilkens joined the medical staff at Willowbrook State School, he had no idea he would help father a revolution.

It was the summer of 1970, and the 28-year-old Kansas City native was finishing his third year in a residency program at the U.S. Public Health Service Hospital in Clifton. Dr. Wilkens was looking for a change and he was looking to stay on Staten Island; the Willowbrook job fit the criteria.

Moreover, working with Willowbrook's mentally retarded residents appealed to Dr. Wilkens' youthful idealism. He wanted more than to just practice medicine; like many of his generation, he wanted to participate in social reform.

But despite his vague notions of activism, Dr. Wilkens really had no concept of what Willowbrook was like. His first day at work — he was assigned to Building 6, considered one of the worst wards — he was jolted by the overcrowding, the utter lack of available resources, the wail of patients and the terrible stench.

"I was really taken aback that it was so wild," he recalled. "The worst part of it for me was the confinement. It was a jail for those patients, a lifelong jail."

Most new employees at Willowbrook had the same reaction, Dr. Wilkens said. But after the initial shock, others grew to accept the situation. By contrast, Dr. Wilkens decided that something had to be done, and he was ready to lead the charge.

Among those in the field, it was no secret that Willowbrook was little more than a human warehouse. The problems were well-documented: The horrible overcrowding and the frightful understaffing; the poor hygiene

which resulted in continual epidemics of hepatitis; the inadequate training and recreational programs; the mysterious injuries suffered by residents; the everyday abuse and neglect.

Willowbrook was swathed in controversy from the day it opened. Construction on the facility began in the late 1930s, but by the time it was completed, the country was at war and the federal government took over the institution to create Halloran General Hospital. After the war, the campus was used by the Veterans Administration and it wasn't until 1951 that the state wrested back control of the facility and opened Willowbrook State School.

The problems began immediately. Because Willowbrook was built to relieve overcrowding, other state institutions were invited to transfer patients to the new institution; it is not surprising that many sent their most difficult and most severely handicapped patients. From the start, Willowbrook held a greater percentage of the profoundly retarded than any other state facility; by 1969, three-fourths of Willowbrook patients were profoundly or severely retarded.

Some said Willowbrook received less resources because its patients were considered hopeless. Yet in the early days, the facility did not have a bad reputation — occasionally, parents from outside New York would abandon a handicapped child at Grand Central Station so the child could be placed at the "renowned" Staten Island institution.

But by the 1960s, it became apparent that Willowbrook was troubled. In 1964, a state legislative committee toured Willowbrook, witnessed the conditions first-hand and wrote a critical

report. The following year, a series of violent deaths inspired media coverage and a grand jury investigation. That was the same year Sen. Robert Kennedy made a surprise visit to Willowbrook and scathingly compared the facility to a zoo.

When Dr. Wilkens arrived on the scene, the conditions were no worse than in the 1960s — in fact, the numbers were beginning to look a little better. In 1971 Willowbrook had about 5,300 patients in a facility meant for 4,500; in 1964 the institution had had 6,400 patients — and a thousand fewer employees.

But Dr. Wilkens was not persuaded by the philosophy of the Willowbrook administration that the state had neither the money nor the desire for further improvements, and he found an ally in another young doctor, William Bronston, who was already earning a reputation as a rabble-rouser. Like Dr. Wilkens, Dr. Bronston was outraged by the conditions at Willowbrook and made no bones about the changes he thought necessary.

The key, Dr. Wilkens and Dr. Bronston figured, was the establishment of community services. Although the theories were relatively new at the time, Dr. Bronston in particular was familiar with studies showing that the mentally retarded could achieve remarkable progress in community programs which emphasized "normalization."

Dr. Wilkens and Dr. Bronston thought the best way to pressure the state to start such programs was by organizing a reformist movement among the Willowbrook employees. They talked with colleagues; called meetings, even sponsored seminars with guest speakers who were familiar with community programs for the retarded.

"We tried — we really tried," Dr. Wilkens said, "but the response was zip. They probably didn't like newcomers coming in with what they regarded as covert hints that things hadn't been done right in the past."

The other doctors were the most hostile, perhaps because they felt most threatened by any sort of reform which would close the institution. Dr. Wilkens said, "They didn't want to make waves and they just didn't agree with us."