

Working at Willowbrook: 3 tell their stories

By JULIE MACK
Advance Staff Writer

It seems ironic in retrospect. But in 1971, a casual observer could draw marked similarities between Michael Wilkens, Kevin Sullivan and James Walsh, who worked together in the back wards of Willowbrook State School.

Then they were all young men in the 20's, just embarking on their careers. Each was fairly new to the institution, and each worked at Willowbrook because it was a "meaningful" job. All three thought the institution needed reform.

But they went about it in dramatically different ways.

Wilkens helped spawn a revolt that eventually led to the Willowbrook Consent Decree and the entire overhaul of the state's care for the mentally retarded. Walsh resolved to work inside the system; today he is director of Willowbrook, since renamed the Staten Island Developmental Center. Sullivan tried working within the state system and stayed at SIDC for 10 years, but he finally quit his job in disgust and now works for a private agency serving the retarded.

Wilkens, Sullivan and Walsh are not representative of the entire Willowbrook staff; in some respects, their experiences may have been more intense than most. But they provide an interesting study of how the events at Willowbrook in 1971-72 and the subsequent developments impacted on the staff, and the diversity of responses and emotions.

Page 1 of 2 pages