

'It was like being involved in a war'

Dr. Michael Wilkens left Willowbrook State School more than 13 years ago, but he still views his time at the institution as "sort of a nightmare."

But he also said he is proud of what was accomplished during his 18 months at Willowbrook. "I think we were effective," he said. "I think history was with us."

Along with a small group of colleagues on the Willowbrook staff, Wilkens played a central role in the uproar over conditions at Willowbrook in the early 1970s. Although the parents of Willowbrook patients eventually led the call for reform, it was people like Wilkens who proved the catalyst. Indeed, squalor was a part of the institution throughout the 1960s, and parents simply wrung their hands in frustration; it wasn't until the parents were encouraged by Wilkens and William Bronston, another doctor at Willowbrook, that they finally took to the streets in protest.

The difference in 1971 was, as much as anything, a change in the country's social climate. The rabble-rousers of Willowbrook staff were children of the 1960s and influenced by the liberal idealism of the times. They viewed Willowbrook as another example of social injustice, comparable to the Vietnam War and the civil rights movement, which could — and should — be fought through public demonstrations.

"The whole spirit was to move forward on social levels," Wilkens said, "and it occurred to Bill and I and some of the social workers and a lot of other people that pastures were a-plenty at Willowbrook as far as injustice was concerned.

"Ours was a purely professional stance, but we used social action techniques because there was such inertia."

Eventually, Wilkens' activism cost him his job; he was fired after he disobeyed an order by Willowbrook Director Jack

Hammond to stop meeting with the parents.

Ironically, Wilkens said, he was ready to quit about the time he was fired. "I was getting pretty discouraged, pretty depressed, and I was ready to pack my bags," Wilkens said. "Still, I was really surprised when Hammond fired me. I thought he was pretty ambivalent about what we were doing; he wasn't willing to do it himself, but I thought deep down he sort of approved.

"But I think he was a pretty proud guy and when he realized the parents weren't liking him, he got pretty mad."

Even after he left the institution, Wilkens continued his activism. More than a dozen times after his firing, he returned to the campus to lead television film crews and reporters who were eager to do exposes. In addition, Wilkens traveled the state to speak about Willowbrook; he was a witness at several governmental hearings, and he spoke at seminars and in front of civic groups about the changes which were needed.

But by the summer of 1972, two years after he first came to Willowbrook and seven months after Willowbrook became the object of attention, Wilkens returned to his native Kansas City.

Since his return, he has completed his residency in internal medicine and worked in a free inner-city health clinic. Now 43, he is the director of internal medicine at a Kansas City hospital and is the father of three children.

Willowbrook was another time, another world for Wilkens, but he still remembers.

"I still dream about the kids," he said, "about walking up to Building 6 and having them call to me, 'Dr. Wilkens, Dr. Wilkens, when are you going to get me out?' The whole thing was sort of a nightmare. It was a lot like being involved in a war."