

'90 percent of my memories are good'

Kevin Sullivan decided to quit his job at Staten Island Developmental Center the day he walked into a building and saw a client dead on the floor.

"When I walked in, they say that he had choked on some bread," Sullivan said. "At first, I thought they were kidding. But sure enough, he was dead."

"The thing was, the body was just lying there in the middle of the room. The nurse was waiting for the doctor to come to verify that this guy was dead, and they didn't want to move him."

"But it was inhumane. People were literally stepping over the body to go about their business. I was saying, hey, let's put him in the office or something until the doctor comes. Finally I got a sheet and put it over the body."

A nine-year veteran at SIDC, Sullivan resigned in 1981, only a few months before he would have become eligible for a pension. He took a job as director of a Staten Island day program operated by Association for Children with Retarded Mental Development, a non-profit agency.

"I took a financial beating to go into the voluntary sector," Sullivan said. "But it was question of whether I wanted to do my job or not. I found you couldn't be innovative in a state institution — you had to clear everything you did with people all the way up to Albany."

But the bitter feelings are not the whole story. "Ninety percent of my memories of Willowbrook are good," Sullivan said.

He started at SIDC in 1971 as an idealistic college student looking for a job "that was something worthwhile" and was assigned to Building 9 as a recreation assistant.

It was a good building, he said. Unlike some of the other buildings, this one had a caring, dedicated staff, and superiors (including James Walsh) who Sullivan said would fight for the clients. But even so, job conditions were rough. Fifty men "were crowded into a single ward with beds were spaced only inches apart. There was a perennial shortage of supplies."

"There were times you would have 50 naked men lined up to take a shower, and the shower was a guy standing with a hose. And there would be no soap, no towels. The water might be cold. There might not have been pajamas to dress them in afterwards or blankets on the bed. At times like that, you'd say to yourself, 'What am I doing here?'"

"But I'd tell myself that maybe if I wasn't there, the men wouldn't get showers at all. And it was me who would yell at some people so the men could get clothing, get towels."

Within a few months of Sullivan's arrival at Willowbrook, the conditions were ex-

posed by the media. It was those outraged reports changed the course of direction for Willowbrook.

Like much of the staff, Sullivan was ambivalent about the media onslaught. "At first, I thought, this is good. Money will start flowing in, programs will start up," he said. But Sullivan also felt uneasy about what he perceived as the exploitive, sensational nature of the reporting.

"The thing is, if you wanted to find very negative, very unpleasant ways in which people live, you were going to find them at Willowbrook," Sullivan said. "But no one ever showed the other side of the story. There was a lot of good, caring people who worked there. The cameras never showed that, and those workers were really hurt by that. It was very demoralizing. Because of the (media) coverage, if you told people you worked at Willowbrook, it was like, 'Oh really? Who did you beat up today?'"

But if the television reports were demoralizing to Sullivan, they also were indirectly introduced him to his future wife, Jean.

Jean Sullivan was a high school student when the Willowbrook scandals flashed regularly on the 6 o'clock news, and while watching one of those reports, Jean decided she wanted to work at the institution.

She was hired and started her new job a day after her graduation from Susan Wagner High School. She was assigned to Sullivan's building, and enjoyed the work so much that her summer job turned into a two-year stint.

She and Kevin took clients on trips — shopping excursions and out to dinner. After they were married, they brought clients to their home for the holidays. "We had a ball," Jean said.

"I really believe we did have an impact on an individual basis with clients," Kevin said.

But while the couple enjoyed the one-to-one relationships with the clients, they suffered under the bureaucracy. Frustrated, Jean quit in 1976; she said there were too many people who need care and not enough staff to do the job properly. "I just felt I couldn't do it any longer. I felt like I was beating my head against the wall," she said.

"Willowbrook was not an easy place to work," Kevin said. "I've never regretted leaving."

But he still thinks about SIDC. "One thing I remember is how it was at night, when the wind was blowing and you hear it whistle in those buildings. It was a sort of scary. And especially on those nights, there was a sense that Willowbrook was a world onto itself — that no one really knew or really cared about it except for those us in there."