

# 'I decided to work within the system'

In 1969, James Walsh was a 20-year-old college dropout looking for a job.

He had majored in psychology before he left Marist College, and he liked the idea of working in human services. Someone suggested he apply at Willowbrook; although Walsh had never even heard of the institution, he followed the suggestion, took a summer job as an assistant recreation instructor and was assigned to Willowbrook's adolescent unit.

The ward was one of Willowbrook's better operations — there was not the severe overcrowding, understaffing and lack of supplies that marked the institution's back wards. It also helped that clients in the adolescent unit were high-functioning — some, in fact, weren't even retarded. "They were probably juvenile delinquents more than anything, and they didn't have anywhere else to go," Walsh said.

It was, on the whole, a positive experience. Walsh enjoyed his work, and his skills in working with the handicapped and working within the institutional system, were duly noted. Eventually, the Willowbrook administration arranged a leave of absence for Walsh so he could get his college degree and move up the

management ladder.

When Walsh returned to Willowbrook in 1971, he was assigned to the same building to which William Bronston was assigned. Like Bronston, Walsh was taken aback by the conditions. This was Walsh's first taste of the infamous back wards, and he was stunned by the contrast between this and the showcase unit where he worked before.

"My first reaction? Let's just say I had second thoughts about my career," Walsh said. "I couldn't believe that people would live this way. It was a human warehouse; there was no other way to describe it. There were no programs or anything; the residents just sat all day. The sanitation — well, it really didn't exist. And the overcrowding; well, let me tell you, we had 250 clients in a building where the certified capacity was 90 to 100. When I became a supervisor, I had to walk on the beds to go on my rounds."

Walsh said he often talked with Bronston about the situation. "We had many discussions over the way to change things," Walsh said. But while Wilkens and Bronston pushed for dissent against the Willowbrook management, Walsh decided "I was going to work within the system. I thought I could have impact by

developing programs for the clients; I knew how to tap into the system."

But while Walsh was beginning his own reforms, the public protests and media onslaught began. When Geraldo Rivera visited Willowbrook, "I saw myself on the 6 o'clock news," Walsh said ruefully.

He felt anger, but mostly ambivalence. "What was on TV was not dummy film. It was really like that, and in a way, it was bringing attention to the plight of the mentally retarded," Walsh said. "But there were some good things at Willowbrook — the staff was dedicated, they had to be — and that's where I disagreed with the coverage."

But Walsh supported the changes that were taking place — the attempts to alleviate the overcrowding, the establishment of programs for even the most disabled clients. He also began to realize that there was a limit to reforming Willowbrook; that some of the problems were inherent in the institutional system, and that the real solution was closing Willowbrook and placing the clients in the community.

His change in attitude — from supporting the institution to encouraging its closure — was