

# A look back: Lives of 3 SIDC clients show change

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When the Advance published its first story about the squalid conditions at Willowbrook State School, it was November 1971 and the institution housed about

5,400 mentally retarded and handicapped persons.

Four months after the Advance's first story, the New York Civil Liberties Union filed a class-action suit charging the state with violating the civil rights of Willowbrook residents. That suit resulted in the Willowbrook Consent Decree, a landmark document that accorded the clients the right to move out of the institution (since renamed the Staten Island Developmental Center) and into the community.

In the past 10 years since the consent decree was signed, about 4,800 persons have been moved out of Willowbrook — although many have simply been transferred to other institutions.

The process of community placement has much slower than expected, and the NYCLU complains that many of the clients are not getting all that they are,

due.

But certainly, the state's attempts at reform have had dramatic impact on the lives of past and present Willowbrook residents — to the extent that others served by the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities complain that the Willowbrook "class" gets preferential treatment.

The last part of this series on Staten Island Developmental Center are profiles of two former Willowbrook residents and one person who is still living there. Their stories reflect the diversity of experiences among the Willowbrook clients.

One of the former residents,

Bernie Carabello, probably didn't belong in an institution in the first place; today he holds a job and lives on his own, and is even writing an autobiography about his 17 years in Willowbrook. While his story sounds unusual, an OMRDD employee says, "There are a lot of Bernie Carabellos" among the former Willowbrook clients.

Douglas Desterdick, who is moderately retarded and has some physical disabilities, is probably even more typical of the Willowbrook class. He now lives in a supervised apartment in West Brighton and spends six hours a day learning vocational skills at a sheltered workshop in New Brighton.

Peter Montessani is one of 600

people still living at Staten Island Developmental Center. Like most of the others who remain at the institution, Montessani is severely disabled both mentally and physically. Because of his handicaps, Montessani will never mainstream into the community in the same manner as Desterdick or Carabello. But he is scheduled to move into a group home on Staten Island, one of the four proposed for Corson's Brook Woods, when SIDC closes two years from now.

*(This is the last in a six-part series on the Staten Island Development Center and what has happened to it since the consent decree was issued 10 years ago.)*