

Bernard remembers hard life on the inside

Bernard Carabello, age 34, began his life 13 years ago.

As far as Carabello is concerned, his first 21 years were wasted — times to be forgotten, or if not forgotten, at least tucked away in the outer reaches of memory.

Born in 1950 on Manhattan's Lower East Side, Carabello entered Willowbrook State School at the age of 4 because he was physically handicapped by cerebral palsy.

Willowbrook was an institution for the mentally retarded, but Carabello's family had nowhere else to send him. Moreover, doctors in those days didn't think there was much difference between Carabello and the Willowbrook residents — whether the problem was a disabled body or a disabled mind, the solution was institutionalization.

For the next 18 years, Carabello's world was the Willowbrook wards. "When you were a kid, it wasn't bad," Carabello said about Willow-

brook. "They treated kids a certain way because kids are cute and cuddly."

But as Carabello grew older and moved into the adult wards, the situation became more difficult. The wards were dirtier, overcrowded and understaffed. There were occasional beatings from other residents who were violent or by Willowbrook employees who used force to keep Carabello in line. "I'd act out sometimes," Carabello said. "I was living in a frustrating situation."

By 1971, as a 21-year-old, Carabello was a resident of Building 7, considered one of the worst wards at Willowbrook. Sixty severely and profoundly retarded residents lived in a room with only two overworked attendants.

"On weekends, there were no clothes. Period," Carabello said, explaining that dressing the clients took too much effort for the staff. At mealtime, the attendants had time to spend only two

or three minutes with each client, he said. "They (the attendants) would mix all the food together on the plate and shove in the person's mouth. For showers and baths, they used the same pails that they used for mopping the floor.

"And the smell. Have you ever been to the Staten Island Zoo? It was worse than that."

It was horrible, but Carabello coped. It says something that he was in Building 7 by choice; the administration offered to transfer him to a building with other high-functioning clients, but living with severely handicapped residents allowed Carabello to minimize his own handicap. "I guess I felt important.

"I had to compromise myself," he added. "I had no other choice. I had to tell myself that this is it, that I had to make the best of it. One thing that made it easy to accept living at Willowbrook was that I was living in a secure environment."

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