

His life changed when he befriended Dr. Michael Wilkins, a Willowbrook physician who led the call for reform in late 1971. As Wilkins and Dr. William Bronston, also on the Willowbrook staff, started to organize protests against the institution's conditions, Carabello eagerly pledged his cooperation. When the doctors inspired parents of the Willowbrook Benevolent Society to mount public demonstrations, Carabello was on the front lines representing the institution's 5,400 residents.

"That's when you might say I got my basic education," Carabello said. "I was sure going through a learning experience."

Carabello left Willowbrook in February 1972; by this time, pressured by parents and the media, Willowbrook was eager to relieve its overcrowding and a social worker offered to get Carabello released.

It was a confusing transition; Carabello was thrilled at his newfound freedom, but he was also confused. Willowbrook was terrible; it was also familiar and secure, and leaving it was "scary as hell," Carabello said. "I went through a real identity crisis."

For the next few years, he lived on public assistance and explored his new world. In 1978, he got a job as an advocate for the handicapped in a federal program.

He now works a full-time job at a Manhattan resource center for the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities (he is currently on

leave because of a badly broken ankle). He lives alone on Manhattan's West Side in a neatly furnished one-bedroom apartment that includes a computer and a bookcase full of back issues of National Geographic.

Despite his new life, Carabello has not put Willowbrook behind him. He is writing his autobiography. ~~He still keeps in close~~

contact with Michael Wilkins, now a doctor in Kansas City. He still thinks about the people left at the institution.

"I think about them constantly," he said. "The consent decree was a victory for us, but it was not a total victory. It cannot be a total victory while people are still living in institutions."