



ADVANCE PHOTO/TONY CARANNANTE

Staten Island Developmental Center Director James J. Walsh, center, shown here with patients Patricia Parisi and Harry Raggkamp, called the ground-breaking "a new beginning" for SIDC.

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# Ceremony celebrates SIDC's new group homes

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More than 100 people gathered on the Staten Island Developmental Center (SIDC) campus yesterday to celebrate the groundbreaking for three group homes that will highlight the facility's new image.

SIDC director James Walsh, standing a few feet from the three freshly dug foundations, called the group homes a "new beginning" for a facility that will turn over most of its property to the College of Staten Island next summer.

"We are ending Willowbrook, and this is the final chapter," Walsh said, referring to the facility's former name, the Willowbrook State School. "Behind you is the new beginning."

The ceremony comes a little more than two months after work began on the three buildings — two 12-bed residences for the mentally retarded and a 24-bed facility. All three buildings are slated for completion by August 1987.

The group homes, together with six other residences and a recre-

ational center under renovation elsewhere on the campus, will comprise a facility known as the Richmond Complex, which will remain when SIDC closes its doors next summer.

In a dramatic moment during yesterday's ceremonies, which also included a ribbon-cutting for one of the renovated campus residences, Walsh noted that one of the group homes will be named after Anthony F. Pinto. Pinto, whose daughter died of leukemia at the facility in 1959, has since become known as a tireless advocate for the mentally retarded.

Construction of the three group homes had been delayed by vigorous opposition from environmental groups, who had protested the state's plans to place the homes in Corsons Brook Woods. Under pressure from the groups, Gov. Mario Cuomo ordered the site moved to a point adjacent to the woods.

In remarks yesterday, Assemblywoman Elizabeth Connelly, D-West Brighton, who has lobbied heavily for the group homes, said she regretted the governor's decision but is now looking toward the future.

"I know the governor did a lot of soul searching in his decision to move the site," she said. "But that's all behind us now."

The ceremony was marked by a number of references to a scandal in the early 1970s in which Willowbrook State School was cited for the widespread neglect of its clients.

The scandal led to a consent decree in which the facility agreed to begin the slow process of placing all its 2,500-plus clients into the community with a goal of closing. By yesterday, only 197 clients remained in the facility; the Richmond Complex will house 150 clients.

Arthur Webb, commissioner of the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities, said the new Richmond Complex would remove the "cloud" that has hung over the property since the consent decree.

"Willowbrook, sad to say, was a symbol that we all had to live with," he said. "We don't have that cloud over us today."

He said the Richmond Complex's coexistence on the campus with the College of Staten Island and the Institute of Basic Research, which researches treatment of the developmentally disabled, would be unprecedented worldwide.

"When society can bring these three elements together, it is really an accomplishment," he said.

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