

Notorious building's end on way

By MARY ENGELS

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James Walsh, executive director of the Staten Island Developmental Center—the former Willowbrook—looks forward to the day when Building 2 comes down.

“That’s the day the place will be officially closed for me,” he said, adding: “It was the building that was the most overcrowded with clients and that everyone seemed to single out when writing or talking about ‘the horrors of the place.’”

The center, which is in the process of “operation closedown,” is down to 127 clients and four residential buildings. At one time, Willowbrook had the world’s largest population of the mentally retarded and developmentally disabled, with some 6,200 clients housed in about 80 buildings over 380 acres of land.

Walsh, the ninth director of the complex, noted he was also the one with the most seniority.

6,000 clients

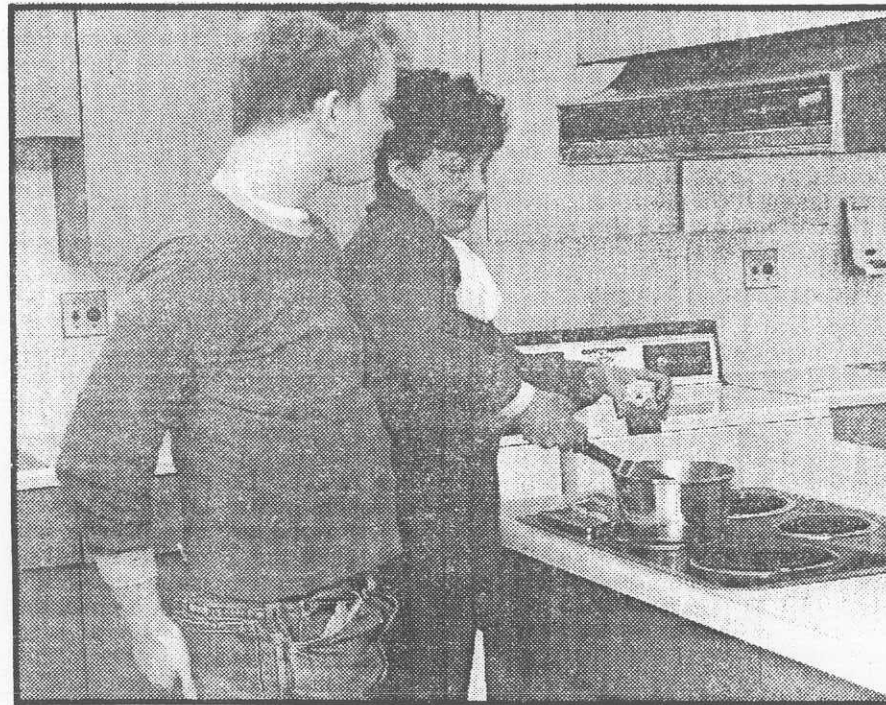
“I first came aboard in 1969 when there were over 6,000 clients and about 200 on the staff. I was overwhelmed by the size and immensity of the complex and the clients.”

Walsh left to finish his education, returning in 1972 as a lawsuit was brought by parents over conditions at the facility.

“The irony is that Willowbrook was first built to relieve the overcrowding of upstate facilities. The first clients came in about 1954.”

Walsh said there were a lot of things wrong in the system.

“Unfortunately, in those days, the



ACTING PROGRAM Director Connie Johannson shows resident of Staten Island Developmental Center cooking technique.

state office of mental retardation was the stepchild when it came to getting funding. If there is one thing I relate to the parents and the lawsuit, it is that it served as a catalyst to bring the problem out of the closet and into the open.

“If nothing else, Willowbrook caused us to treat those citizens with developmental disabilities as regular human beings,” he said.

By September

Walsh expects the facility to be to-

tally closed by September.

“Our residents have already begun moving into homes located along Executive Way and the first of the three new group homes now under construction on Staten Island Developmental Center property will be ready by the end of April,” he said.

Walsh explained that the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities had managed to hold on to about 145 to 160 acres. “Part of that will be used for the Rich-

mond Complex, which will house 48 clients, and another part will be used for the Richmond Community Resource Center, which will be used for various day treatment programs and community resources,” he said.

“We were fortunate in getting almost double the original acreage asked for, thanks to the efforts and the advocacy of the parents, the volunteer agencies and Assemblywoman Elizabeth Connelly,” he said.

For research

A portion of the land also houses the Institute for Basic Research.

“The majority of the property will go to the College of Staten Island, and we will be working with them in developing programs dealing with the problems of the developmentally disabled. We hope it will serve as a model nationally,” Walsh said, noting that “very few schools in the country deal with the problem at all.”

Walsh added, “Population-wise, Staten Island provides services to over 2,500 clients. By 1988 or '89, we expect to have more than 3,000 day-treatment slots, and some 800 residential beds in the community.”

Those clients who will reside in the Richmond Complex are “all severely profoundly retarded and are from Staten Island,” Walsh said.

Over the years since the decree, the majority of clients have gone back to their local areas or to homes of family or friends. Some went on to start their own homes elsewhere.

“It is a case where out of something bad—something which Robert Kennedy once called ‘a snake pit’—has come something good, very good,” said Walsh.

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