

# A walk through the past, hope for the future

## Former reporter remembers the 'pit'

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New York, finally, is closing Willowbrook State School, but the sprawling state center, with its barracks-like brick buildings and pretty green woods will remain firmly etched in the minds of generations of Staten Islanders — myself included.

My first glimpse of Willowbrook, nearly 30 years ago, came when I was an 8-year-old who played baseball at Willowbrook Park, which is adjacent to the state school. The residents of the state school — we just called it "Willowbrook" — used to wander over to the ball fields, and stand and watch us. I was pretty scared of the residents since they grunted often, dressed poorly and were simply different looking people whose behavior we couldn't predict.

Sometimes the residents would chase the balls for us; at other times they would motion, but we couldn't figure what they wanted. They probably wanted to play with us. I ignored the residents, mostly because I was scared. Most Staten Islanders probably were scared, and that's why we had dumped the disabled out of sight and out of mind at Willowbrook's sprawling campus.

### Commentary

When I was 10 years old, I was in a public school glee club and we went to sing at Willowbrook. We stood on a platform and sang silly songs as the residents, hundreds of them assembled before us, listened, not very quietly. They were a motley, unkempt crew, and I wonder why someone, back then, didn't have the sense to say, "These people don't seem very well cared for." No one that I know of said that — not for many years at least.

At the concert, I recall, the kid next to me fainted, and a little girl near me, Marjorie, vomited. Just like most Staten Islanders, they had never seen the disabled in person. I was a veteran from my ball-playing days, and the disabled weren't so shocking. Had the disabled been living in our neighborhoods, Marjorie wouldn't have been shocked or scared.

My next relationship with Willowbrook came many years later, when I was working as a reporter for the Staten Island Advance. The woman writing then about Willowbrook was leaving reporting, just as I received a tip that the director at Willowbrook was being fired. I pursued the story and it made Page 1. Suddenly, the Willowbrook "beat" was mine.

For the next three years I wrote Willowbrook stories, alternating between despair and elation as I watched progress crawl along at the center. Willowbrook was a learning experience for me — in human relations and journalism.

A reporter is supposed to keep a professional distance from those he writes about, but Willowbrook was different. Passion, not distance, was needed at Willowbrook.

I recall my first tour of Willowbrook, led by a parent who told no one that I was a reporter. We went to a ward where residents — some very young and some quite old — were in larger cribs. They were deformed and pathetic, mostly from poor medical care. None was toilet-trained, although I learned later that almost all the disabled can be trained.

I watched feeding take place. There was not enough staff available to feed residents; by the time some got fed the food was cold. It was unappetizing to begin with, and disgusting by the time it arrived: With proper training, many of those residents could have fed themselves. I knew by the end of the tour that I had to make my reporting help bring reforms. Not very objective, I suppose, but objectivity and Willowbrook didn't go together.

I recall another tour that was for governor-elect Hugh Carey. It was a poignant tour, with Carey seeing a cast-covered resident buzzed by flies because there were no screens on windows. "That's impossible," he said. Nothing was impossible at Willowbrook.

Carey went to one large ward that resembled a barracks. The residents ran to corners as television lights blared. A bad place to live was transformed into a horrible place. At another stop, two men dressed as blue whales danced around the governor-elect as he stopped at a birthday party for a resident. The scene was surreal.

At one point on the tour a resident, known at Willowbrook as