A walk through the past, hope for the future

Former reporter remembers the 'pit'

By ROBERT MIRALDI
Special to the Advance

Commentary

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 gimpse 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.

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.

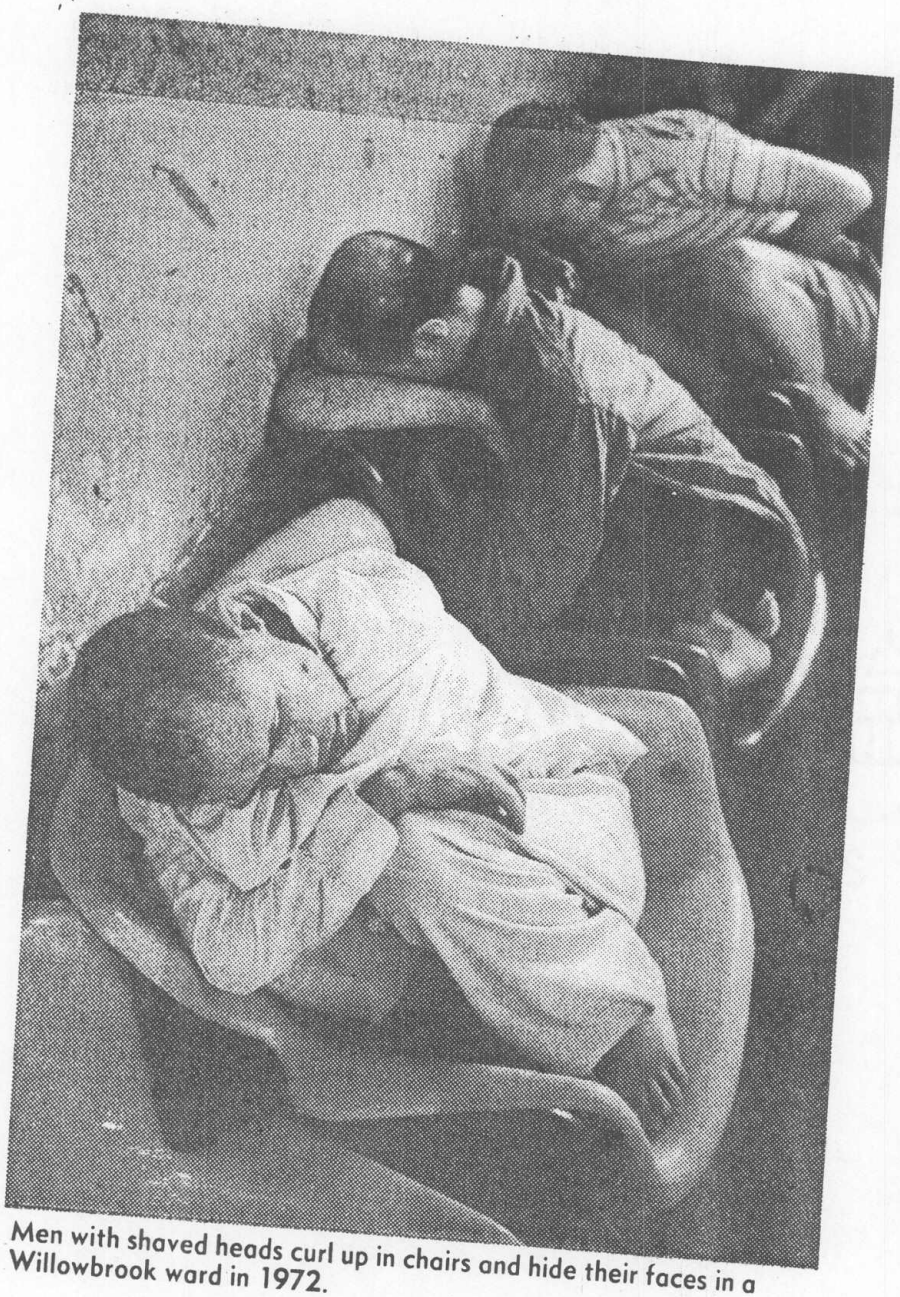
I recall another tour that was for governor-elect Hugh Carey. It was a poignant tour, with Carey seeing a cast-covered resident buzzed by flies because there were no screens on windows. "That's impossible," he said. Nothing was impossible at Willowbrook.

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

ADVANCE PHOTOS

Willowbrook patients waiting for their meal in this 1971 photograph.



Men with shaved heads curl up in chairs and hide their faces in a Willowbrook ward in 1972.

"Paul Newman," beckoned to the governor. "Hey buddy," he said, "you know what's wrong with this place? It's the administration. They don't know what they're doing." The resident was pretty much right. One thing that must have been evident to Carey: "Paul Newman" didn't belong in an institution; he belonged in a community residence.

Soon after that tour, the state agreed to close Willowbrook while at the same time clean it up for those who remained there. I asked a question just days after the state's pledge: How can you promise to close a place and also promise to spend millions on a facility that was soon to be obsolete? There was no answer forthcoming, in part because many believed the place would never close.

In the following months I wrote about three things: The efforts to clean up Willowbrook; the attempt to place residents in small community facilities, and the battle taking place in federal court between lawyers for the parents and the state.

Willowbrook was still a "snake pit," as Robert Kennedy called it. I wrote about the resident who had his ear bitten off; about the little girl who died because of a mixup in messages; about the man who froze to death in the woods surrounding Willowbrook; about the kid whose mother discovered whip marks on his back. Progress was slow, but I knew that as a journalist, I had the chance to help, to impact on lives, maybe to save lives. Journalism, I knew, was important.

Meanwhile, Staten Island residents were howling about taking the disabled into their neighborhoods. One area cried it was being saturated; another said the street was too small for ambulances; a third just burned down a house for the disabled. Progress in residential placement was equally slow. As a journalist I was caught between the concerns of the neighborhoods and the needs of the disabled.

I remember one neighborhood group trying to convince me late one evening that their street was bad for the disabled. OK for them, but bad for the handicapped. I remember a community board meeting where people screamed and cursed the state, where a doctor poured unpaid Medicaid bills on a table and where state officials feebly tried to say they would do better in the future.

In court, a feisty old federal judge was mediating as parents decried the state's continued resistance and as a new commissioner sweet-talked the judge. An ideological split was evident also: Some parents didn't want their kids in angry neighborhoods; some professionals felt that the most disabled couldn't survive in the community. I suspect that debate continues today.

I didn't know what effect, if any, my stories were having. A friend, who was on one of the Willowbrook review panels, told me: "You'd be surprised," he said. "They think you're everywhere, that you're watching." That cheered me even while progress crawled along.

Before I left the Advance I wrote a story that foreshadowed my next relationship with Willowbrook. Since the center was being closed, I wondered, what would happen to the 380-acre of property there, the lovely, wooded property? I had gotten to know it well as I snooped around buildings, looking in windows and seeing, at least twice, residents being abused.

Behind the scenes I was urging land conservationists to walk through the property, to get to know the woods and to urge the state to turn it into a park. My idea was that the state should create a special park for the handicapped, should turn Willowbrook's failure into a natural preserve for the disabled. Much of the woods are saved today, but the park for the handicapped seems just an idealist's dream.

I don't know if there will be a next phase, but there should be. The disabled are living now, by the hundreds, in small neighborhood facilities. You see them probably on buses and at the stores. Some enterprising reporter should start snooping to see how they're getting along, what conditions are like. People I've spoken to tell me that progress is great, and that conditions are wonderful.

We should make sure that is the case. Willowbrook is closing, finally, and we don't want any small Willowbrooks in our neighborhoods. Too many lives have been lost already. It shouldn't happen again, and it won't if we care and if we're vigilant.

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