

"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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