

Staten Island Advance

Vol. 102. No. 22,447 Wednesday, September 16, 1987

S.I. Newhouse, President and Publisher, 1895 - 1979

Donald E. Newhouse, Secretary

Richard E. Diamond, Publisher

Les Trautmann, Editor

950 Fingerboard Rd., Staten Island, N.Y. 10305

Telephone: (718) 981-1234

Classified: 720-6000

Sports: 981-2666

Our opinion

End of a sad era

The end for Staten Island Developmental Center has been a long time coming, and thanks to the state's grandiosity, it will be a while longer. But Willowbrook/SIDC is officially closing this week.

In typical state fashion, the closing ceremonies will take three days to complete. Remember, this was Willowbrook State School, a place Robert Kennedy once called "a snake pit." It's hard to imagine how the state has that much to be ceremonial about.

The Advance, of course, played a central role in the Willowbrook saga. Then-reporters Jane Kurtin and Robert Miraldi were the first to break the story of conditions there. Geraldo Rivera notwithstanding.

Mr. Rivera, through his regionwide audience, and to his credit, focused national attention on the problems there. Eventually, the shamed government had no choice but to react.

It was simply called "Willowbrook" then, short for Willowbrook State School, until that name became so freighted with ugly connotations that the state bureaucracy chose the antiseptic-sounding Staten Island Developmental Center instead.

"Willowbrook" will forever stand for a reprehensible attitude toward the handicapped that seems almost medieval now. That attitude dictated getting people with unattractive handicaps out of the view of "normal" people. That entailed placing them in large, impersonal warehouses,

where they would live out their meager lives in abhorrent conditions; where many were mistreated and even abused. But they were out of our communities; out of our sight; out of our minds.

Ironically, the SIDC closing comes at a time when the value of "deinstitutionalization" — the cumbersome moniker for the process of taking handicapped people out of large institutions and locating them smaller residences in the community — is being questioned in some quarters, resurrecting thoughts of the old out-of-sight-out-of-mind approach.

Communities battle smaller group homes, of any type, fiercely. Residents of the Willowbrook area even fought the placement of several group homes on the SIDC grounds a while back. Governmental agencies charged with providing care for the handicapped, confronted with this omnipresent pressure, must be tempted to consolidate these scattered campaigns into one big push. Politically speaking, reinstitutionalization (to coin a word) has its merits.

But because of Willowbrook, it will never happen. The exposure of the outrages at Willowbrook in the early 1970s marked the end of a disgraceful era in our treatment of the disabled. Many problems, many battles, many changes lie ahead in our treatment of the mentally handicapped. But as a society, we can never go back. Not after Willowbrook. We are better for the nightmare.