

Advance reporter exposed horrors

Jane Kurtin's chilling stories helped trigger changes

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More than a month before a cocky, swaggering television reporter named Geraldo Rivera shocked the nation with a story about inhumane conditions at Willowbrook State School, a 21-year-old Advance reporter uncovered the story.

The story gained international attention and established Rivera as a reporter who thrived on confrontation and drama. But, as Rivera acknowledged in his book on the subject, in November 1971, Jane Kurtin was the first to get inside the school and uncover the horrible conditions.

"People on Staten Island remember that," said Ms. Kurtin, now a successful caterer, in a telephone interview from her New Jersey home. "There's been a lot written about it. My stories are always mentioned."

Willowbrook was covered extensively in the Advance even before Ms. Kurtin's stories hit print. In August 1965, a series entitled "What's Wrong With Willowbrook" began what was to become a decades-long battle for change.

The following month, the late Robert Kennedy, then U.S. attorney general, toured the facility during a surprise inspection. His findings were not unlike those spotlighted six years later and recorded in Ms. Kurtin's series.

Ms. Kurtin said she was covering stories

about the U.S. Public Health Service Hospital (which closed and later reopened as Bayley Seton Hospital) when she teamed with two young doctors named Mike Wilkens and Bill Bronston.

"They were like hippy doctors, revolutionary doctors," she said. "Anyway, they went to Willowbrook. They called me about a meeting and they suggested that I sneak in. So I did."

Although Rivera's telecasts from the school show him scaling a fence outside the institution, Ms. Kurtin said she walked in, unannounced, uninvited and unimpeded.

"You really just had to walk through the door," Ms. Kurtin said.

Once inside, she said, "it was monstrous. It was just a horrible situation. It was a crazy house, just like in the movies. Everyone was wandering around. It stank. There was no way for the orderlies to take care of everyone. It seemed like it was a mean institution."

Ms. Kurtin said it is difficult for her now — 16 years after the story broke — to remember exactly what she saw and felt then. But her stories from 1971 paint a gruesome and lasting picture for those of us who never got inside the walls.

In a story printed Nov. 16, 1971, Ms. Kurtin wrote: "The boys in Building 6 pick at the sores on their naked bodies during the endless days they spend on wooden benches, curled on the floor or leaning

against the walls of the ward.

"They don't understand the indignity of being perpetually naked or the repulsiveness of their drooling. They don't understand that people are afraid to touch them."

Her stories spurred a flurry of letters to the editor. Some accused her and the Advance of sensationalizing the story. Others, from parents of Willowbrook patients and institutional workers, applauded the exposure. One letter was from a 10½-year-old Emerson Hill girl, Tracey Marshall. In her simple words, she issued a very direct plea: "I have just finished reading about those poor children in Willowbrook," she wrote. "I get very upset when I think about all the money the government wastes on the war and also sending dollars to all those countries. I think it would be a lot better to spend the money on our own children so they can have more people take care of them and teach them how to help themselves."

Once unveiled, the problems at Willowbrook became the subject of countless inquiries and investigations. Tracey Marshall and Miss Kurtin, Geraldo Rivera and the people across the nation who were now focused on Willowbrook watched as the institution began the long, slow process toward bettering itself.

Change came in the form of a 1975 court decree, approved by Judge Orrin Judd of

U.S. District Court in Brooklyn and signed by then Gov. Hugh Carey. Known as the Willowbrook Consent Decree, it was the culmination of a lawsuit filed by the New York Civil Liberties Union and the parents of Willowbrook patients.

The agreement ordered reforms in almost every aspect of care at the institution, including clothing, recreation, patient-staff ratio, programming and evaluation, education, food and medical services.

The biggest impact of the agreement was the reduction of the institution's population, which totaled more than 6,000, through placements in other institutions and to a growing number of small, well-supervised group homes.

Judd's decree went beyond Willowbrook. It marked the beginning of the end of the philosophy by which the mentally retarded were subjected to lifelong isolation from the rest of society.

Willowbrook, which was renamed the Staten Island Developmental Center but which will always be known to Staten Islanders by its former name, will officially close this week and its remaining residents moved to group homes located on the SIDC campus. Most of the 380-acre grounds will be transferred to the City University of New York, which will build a new, consolidated campus for the College of Staten Island.

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