



A former Willowbrook resident greets Gov. Mario Cuomo after the ceremonies. ADVANCE PHOTO/STEVE ZAFFRANO

6 more centers to follow SIDC into oblivion

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Gov. Mario Cuomo said yesterday that six developmental centers across the state will be closed by 1991 as the state continues to make good on a promise made more than a decade ago.

Speaking at the official closing ceremony for the Staten Island Developmental Center, Cuomo said, "governors don't often celebrate the closings of institutions. We spend most of our time cutting ribbons at opening ceremonies. What we actually celebrate today is the opening of a whole new era."

After the remaining developmental centers are closed, following the mandate of the landmark 1975 Willowbrook Consent Decree, the approximately 1,100 former residents of the Staten Island Developmental Center who are still living in metropolitan area institutions will be placed in group homes according to Lou Ganim, director of public affairs

for the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities.

Yesterday's ceremony, which was also attended by former Gov. Hugh Carey, marked the official transfer of ownership of 205 acres on the Willowbrook grounds to the City University of New York, which will build a consolidated campus for the College of Staten Island.

Most of the day yesterday was devoted to congratulating and thanking those responsible for closing SIDC, which was formerly known as the Willowbrook State School. One of those thanked by Cuomo was Jane Kurthin, a former Advance reporter who was the first to break the story about the inhumane conditions in which Willowbrook's 6,000 mentally re-

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tarded clients were forced to live.

As a result of Ms. Kurtin's series, which was followed by a series of televised broadcasts by reporter Geraldo Rivera, who also spoke at the ceremony yesterday, a lawsuit brought by parents of Willowbrook residents and the New York Civil Liberties Union became a nationwide issue.

The lawsuit, brought in U.S. District Court in Brooklyn, resulted in the Willowbrook Consent Decree, signed by Judge Orrin Judd and approved by Carey, who was governor at the time.

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.

The final settlement of the case did not come until this past spring, when the state agreed to close its remaining developmental centers and place the residents in group homes.

During a morning discussion on the historical significance of Willowbrook's closing, Bruce Ennis, a lawyer for the New York Civil Liberties Union, told a story that was first told 16 years ago but that has not lost its shock value.

Ennis said he saw a young retarded boy lying in a medical ward at Willowbrook the first time he visited the facility. The boy had been unattended for so long that the urine that ran down his leg rotted the cast on his foot and caused sores to open on his limb.

Ennis and a nurse removed the plaster cast by just pulling it apart, then picked 35 to 40 maggots from the boy's wounds.

The attorney went on to map out the legal strategy he saw as necessary to end the suffering of the boy and the other residents.

"The strategy was not at all to make Willowbrook a better place to live," he said. "The strategy was to shut down Willowbrook."

Ennis said he received inval-



Former Gov. Hugh Carey delivers his opening remarks.

able assistance from Carey during the 1974 campaign for governor. After a tour of the facilities in which he saw flies covering a boy who was tied to his bed, Carey promised that, if elected, he would work toward the closing of Willowbrook.

Yesterday he said he decided that day that "not ever again would there be 6,000 suffering people. Those days are gone in New York State. As a symbol of neglect, it must go."

Both Carey and Cuomo credited the efforts of state Assemblywoman Elizabeth Connelly for fighting to close the center.

"Betty Connelly is one of the toughest bargainers and negotiators," Cuomo said. "She left my budget department in disarray."

As a tribute to Mrs. Connelly, a community resource center being constructed on the Willowbrook land the state will retain title to will be named the Elizabeth A. Connelly Community Resource Center.

Mrs. Connelly said that when plans were being made to close the school and transfer most of the property to CSI, developers were planning luxury homes and condominiums on the remaining acres. She said this struck her as unfair.

"I thought that if we could eradicate the vestiges of notorious Willowbrook, that some of this land should be retained for the retarded," she said.

The new center will offer day program to mentally retarded

people who are able to live at home with their families. Mrs. Connelly said she convinced the state to fund an Olympic-sized swimming pool that also will be available to community residents.

"I want the community to come to the handicapped to ask to use the pool," she said.

The main theme espoused by most speakers at yesterday's ceremonies was that what happened at Willowbrook must never be forgotten.

One of the most eloquent speeches was delivered by Borough President Ralph J. Lambert, who said: "Where we stand is holy ground, made sacred first by human suffering, then by human love. Willowbrook State School was not only a hell hole for the people who lived here but was a tomb for our moral smugness. It showed us at our worst. It shows us at our best. It is an abomination that it exists. I am thankful that it's here."

The most unforgettable moments of the ceremony came during a speech by Bernard Carabello, a developmentally disabled man who spent 18 years at the school.

"On behalf of every person who used to live with me in this hell hole, thank you very, very much," Carabello said to the assembly. "The first thing we have to do is, number one, never, never forget Willowbrook ever, because this must not ever, ever happen again."

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Former resident Bernard Carabello speaks during the ceremonies.



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Spectators listen during the formal closing of the developmental center.