

Rivera retells his greatest story

By DAVID BIANCULLI

Daily News TV Critic

ANNIVERSARY SHOWS are like memories: they can be remarkable, and tellingly, selectively. For good reason, usually.

Geraldo Rivera, for example, let the month of April 1996 go by totally unremarked, even though it was the 10th anniversary of his "Mystery of Al Capone's Vaults," still the most popular syndicated special in TV history.

Yet today at 4 p.m. on "The Geraldo Rivera Show" (WCBS/Ch. 2), Rivera devotes his entire show to the 25th anniversary of his powerful WABC-TV exposé of inhuman conditions at Staten Island's Willowbrook state facility for the mentally disabled.

The inherent message here: Rivera is more proud of the lives he affected at Willowbrook than of the ratings he amassed in Chicago — as well he should be.

On Jan. 6, 1972, as an "Eyewitness News" correspondent with a purloined key that had been given him by an outraged Willowbrook staffer, Rivera and his camera crew stormed the facility, capturing on film the horrific conditions within: patients naked and isolated in crowded rooms awash with human excrement and misery, enduring an environment more akin to a con-

centration camp than a state-run health facility.

That expose, and the other groundbreaking, issue-defining reports that followed, Rivera now calls "the defining moment of my life as a professional newspaperman."

In today's show, he presents, among other guests, many of the former Willowbrook patients who have thrived since that institution was closed 10 years ago. Some have Down's syndrome, and the unchecked love and pride on their faces says more eloquently than any words why Rivera has every right to be proud.

Asking one former patient about life in the real world, post-Willowbrook, Rivera listens to the man's proud recitation of his daily duties and routine. Then Rivera forms a fist, punches his own heart and asks, "How's your life in here?"

It may be the best question Rivera has ever asked.

"Their story is a triumph of light over darkness," Rivera says at the end of this passionate and intense hour.

It's also a triumph for Rivera, allowing him to remember his salad days as a reporter willing to break the rules to bring to light an important story.

These days, though, any reporter doing what Rivera did would likely be sued for trespassing. Case in point: the recently adjudicated



'EYEWITNESS' TO HORROR: Geraldo at Willowbrook in 1972

lawsuit brought by the Food Lion supermarket chain against ABC News, which concluded with a jury agreeing with its complaints about ABC's undercover investigation of its operations. Damages, to be decided imminently, could run into billions. ABC, of course, is appealing.

Perhaps the courts that

are now curtailing the ways in which journalists can gather and report investigative stories should see this Rivera retrospective, and ask whether stories such as the original "Willowbrook: The Last Great Disgrace" could find their way onto TV today.

If not, then we've got big questions to start asking.