

Movie on Willowbrook State School unfolds 4 stories, past and present

■ The Advance is credited for being the first to highlight problems at the Willowbrook State School and for supporting families at the time

By KAREN O'SHEA
ADVANCE STAFF WRITER

Katie Meskell was scouting out sites for group homes on Staten Island five years ago when she decided to visit the former Willowbrook State School.

The site was being renovated for the College of Staten Island. Ms. Meskell walked into a va-

cant building where her sister, Patty-Anne Meskell, spent 25 years of her life.

"I went in and I cried like I never cried before. I cried for my sister, for my family and for me."

Ms. Meskell, an executive for an organization that provides services to the developmentally disabled, decided to document the stories of families who sent loved ones to Willowbrook — a state institution that once housed 6,000 people in unsanitary and understaffed conditions.

"I realized that if I felt like that and I am a professional working in the field — I talk about Willowbrook all the time — how must other family members feel? People who have not been able to talk about it?" she said.

Celebrities, friends and family members turned out last night for the Manhattan premiere of "Unforgotten: Twenty-Five Years Af-

ter Willowbrook."

The independent film has received solid reviews from the Los Angeles Times and Daily Variety, and could be a possible contender for an Oscar.

Ms. Meskell, a senior vice president at the non-profit HeartShare Human Services of New York, is executive producer of the 57-minute film that highlights the past and the present of four families who sent loved ones to Willowbrook.

The interviews, interwoven with family photographs, home movies and footage of the squalid conditions of the state school, tell the story of brothers, sisters, mothers and fathers who become advocates for the handicapped because of their experiences with Willowbrook.

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