

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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Sal Giordano Sr. of Howard Beach, Queens, recalls the thrill of having his only son at age 33. But soon a friend told the Giordanos there was something wrong with their child.

Sal Giordano Jr. was profoundly retarded. He went to live at Willowbrook at age 5.

"I was told straight up and down by a friend of mine who was a doctor to put him in an institution and forget about it."

Giordano Sr., who is now part of a state task force that monitors institutions for the developmentally disabled, would make the trip from Queens every Sunday to see his son.

"I called every night to see that he ate. If he didn't eat, I would bring him food."

His son's fingers were crushed and his leg broken during his stay at Willowbrook.

A series of stories about conditions at the school featured in the Staten Island Advance led to more media attention and pressure for changes at the institution.

Ms. Meskell credited the Advance last night with being the first to highlight problems at the school and for supporting families at the time.

"Twenty-five years ago a revolution was started on Staten Island that changed the lives of the developmentally disabled not only on Staten Island, but around the world," she said.

A class-action lawsuit filed in 1972 was decided in 1975, when a

federal judge ordered the state to move Willowbrook residents into group homes.

The state missed lots of deadlines and it took several years before the institution closed for good. But the federal court order called for institutions to be replaced with community-based residential group homes, and put an end to the kind of warehousing of people that took place at Willowbrook.

But for families like the Riveras, the damage was done.

Luis Rivera spent more than a decade at Willowbrook and another dozen years at a similar institution before he was moved to a group home.

Jose Rivera Jr. was a year older than his brother. In the film, Rivera recalls the weekly trips his parents made to the facility from the Bronx.

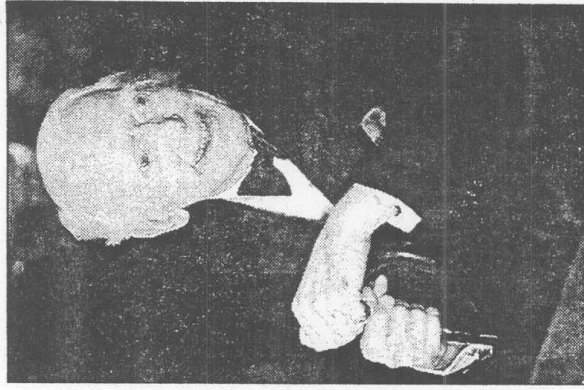
Families could visit with patients for just three hours. The doors to the dormitories were always locked, and parents could never see where their children slept or ate.

"It was like we had no rights. Simply because he is not home with us anymore doesn't mean we don't care," Rivera Jr. says in the film, which was completed last year.

Luis Rivera died shortly before the film was completed.

Ms. Meskell and her sisters Una, Doreen and Patty-Anne, 45, also are featured in the film.

Director Jack Fisher of City



ADVANCE PHOTOS ■ MICHAEL McWEENEY

Actor Douglas Fairbanks Jr.

Lights International production company in Manhattan said he hopes this movie helps families cope with the tragedy of Willowbrook.

Fisher and his brother, Danny, the producer of the movie, also created "A Generation Apart," a film about the children of Holocaust survivors.

Fisher said he wanted to tap into the pain relatives of Willowbrook survivors feel.

Actor Danny Aiello narrates the film that took five years to create at a cost of about \$500,000.

"We really had no idea when we were putting this together that



"Unforgotten" director

Jack Fisher

it would yield this really powerful movie," said Fisher.

"I think it's going to do a lot of good for a lot of people."

HeartShare president and chief executive officer William Guarinello said the movie comes at a time when budget cuts for social services and the disabled loom large.

"This is a way for us to keep it in the minds of people. Although things are getting better, we need to do this."

"Unforgotten: Twenty-Five Years After Willowbrook" opens Feb. 14 at the Angelika Theater in Manhattan.

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Executive producer, Katie Meskell, left, and Jose Rivera Jr. who helped out with the movie, "Unforgotten . . . Twenty-Five Years After Willowbrook," both had siblings at the state school.