

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.

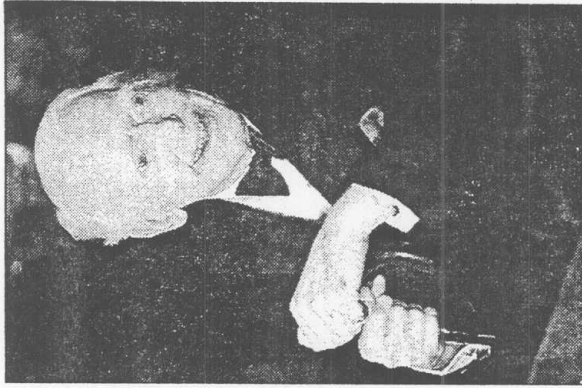
Families could visit with patients for just three hours. The doors to the dormitories were always locked, and parents could never see where their children slept or ate.

"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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