

'I'm a person, I'm a human being'

■ A South Beach woman with a developmental disability proves she can handle the world — and a whole lot more

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At 50, Alice Catalano can slip into a school-girl giggle that is utterly contagious. She loves chatting about work, her sons and fixing up her new home. She'll wrap her arm around a new friend and smile like they've known each other for decades.

This is not the demeanor that most people see, however.

Alice has a developmental disability. It has taught her that strangers will judge her, often treat her as something less than human. So when Alice walks her dog Max along the South Beach boardwalk or her neighborhood streets, her face may be set in a frown.

"I learned not to trust people," she said.

Nowhere was the lesson drilled more effectively than at the Willowbrook State School, where at the age of 12, Alice joined thousands of children with mental retardation and other disabilities packed into institutional dormitories.

"I saw kids being hit with chairs and left in their own feces. I used to talk to the kids that were very low functioning and tell them they didn't deserve to be treated like that," Alice said.

Before being sent to Willowbrook, Alice had known a more caring environment for four years at an upstate residence run by Catholic nuns, she said. Alice had been placed in foster care because her step-father was abusive, and her mother wouldn't leave him or throw him out.

Alice didn't want to leave the Catholic home, but because her disability limited her to sixth-grade school work, "They had to send me to Willowbrook," she said.

"I changed my attitude at Willowbrook," she said. "People called you 'retarded.' They were mean to you. But I always let people know I'm a person and I don't belong tied up and cooped up."

Alice said she always stood up for herself with any threatening staff members. Sometimes she'd have encounters while mopping floors as part of her housekeeping job. "I'd tell them, 'You're not going to hit me. You hit me and I'll pick up the bucket and throw it at you.' They'd say, 'We can treat you the way we want to.' I told them I'd go to the office and I did."

In the supervisory office, "They called me a big mouth and a rat and tattletale," she said. So Alice made good on her threat and hurled her bucket at a

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worker who shoved her around.

Alice was a Willowbrook resident when Sen. Robert F. Kennedy conducted a surprise inspection in 1965 and described the institution as bordering on a "snake pit."

She remembers TV reporter Geraldo Rivera's 1971 visit that brought the horrors of Willowbrook to the nation, and she joined picket lines demanding better conditions.

This year marks the 25th anniversary of the class action lawsuit brought on behalf of Willowbrook residents against New York State. The resulting Willowbrook Consent Decree laid the groundwork for reform in the care, education and housing of people with developmental disabilities. Willowbrook State School, which became the Staten Island Developmental Center, closed in 1987.

Today, the state retains less than half of the campus to provide vastly improved services for people with developmental disabilities. The remaining 200 acres is home to the College of Staten Island, where a recent informal survey indicated that only three out of 18 students know they walk on notorious ground.

Alice Catalano will never forget a step she took on the campus.

Until she turned 21 and was freed from the foster care system, she ran away from Willowbrook a few times, as well as from foster homes where she was placed intermittently.

"I just wanted to go back home to my mother," she said. "I wanted to have a chance to be out in the world."

When she was 19 and living at Willowbrook, Alice became pregnant by her boy friend, who also resided at the institution. She gave birth in St. Vincent's