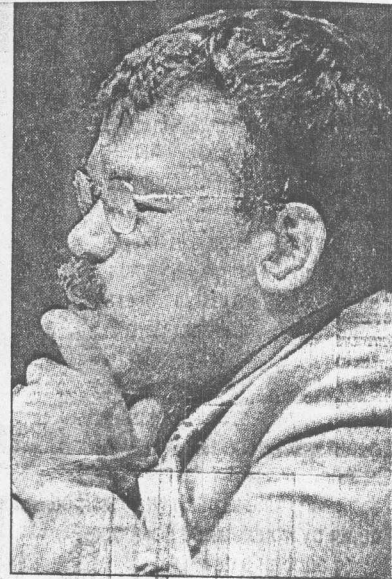


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Dr. William Bronston, a former Willowbrook physician, displays a set of keys from the old institution. He said he still carries them as he carries his rage over what went on there. With him is Diana McCourt, whose daughter, Nina was a plaintiff in the consent decree suit.



ADVANCE PHOTOS ■ IRVING SILVERSTEIN  
Panelist Bernard Carabello of Manhattan, who spent 18 years in Willowbrook after his cerebral palsy was misdiagnosed at age 3 as mental retardation, agrees with calls for an apology.

# Willowbrook's past still able to inflict pain

■ An apology for 'crimes against humanity' is demanded during conference on the squalid school for the mentally retarded

By MICHAEL J. PAQUETTE  
ADVANCE STAFF WRITER

Inhumane. Criminal. Death camp. Hell. No matter who spoke at a conference yesterday marking the 25th anniversary of the signing of the landmark legislation that eventually closed the Willowbrook State School, they elicited the same brutal language. "The name Willowbrook always evokes painful memories," Thomas Maul, commissioner of the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities, told those gathered for the event at the College of Staten Island (CSI), the former site of the infamous institution that once warehoused in filth, isolation and negligence some 6,000 developmentally disabled New Yorkers.

"The meaning of Willowbrook transcends this room. Indeed, it transcends the boundaries of New York state," he said. "Whether you are from Maine or Washington state, if somebody says, 'Let us nev-



Former Gov. Mario Cuomo, left, gets together with former Gov. Hugh Carey at the conference. Carey negotiated and signed the decree, and Cuomo saw that its terms were carried out.

er return to the days of Willowbrook, everybody knows precisely what that person means. Willowbrook means deprivation, human suffering, neglect and shame."

More than 350 people from across the state and around the nation — including former Willowbrook

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# Willowbrook

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residents, their parents, doctors and lawyers, human services advocates, and two former governors — packed CSI's Williamson Theater to celebrate the April 30, 1975, signing of the Willowbrook Consent Decree, the state law that triggered a flood of reforms nationwide concerning the housing and care of the mentally retarded and others with developmental disabilities.

Today, the vast majority of developmentally disabled Americans have been "deinstitutionalized" by similar laws, living under supervision in small groups in regular neighborhoods.

"For 25 years, the Willowbrook judgment has been the driving force in creating community-based residences and expanding the educational and vocational opportunities for the mentally retarded," said Henry J. Kennedy, a New Brighton attorney and human services advocate, who co-chaired the event.

"The Willowbrook Consent Decree is the catalyst, the springboard, for a quality-of-care system, for individualized care," echoed Maul. "But it also is a catalyst for individual rights, individual respect and individual dignity."

The day-long symposium, called "Social Justice Has Prevailed" and co-sponsored by CSI and the Staten Island Developmental Disabilities Council, included a passionate — and at times contentious — panel discussion on Willowbrook's sordid history.

Dr. William Bronston, a California physician who spent three years on the Willowbrook staff before helping construct the 1972 class-action suit against New York that eventually brought about the institution's closure, blasted CSI officials for not constructing a permanent memorial to commemorate the atrocities of Willowbrook.

"This is an evil place. It has an evil history," he said. "And there's no marker that says evil was done here in the name of good."

Dr. Bronston, who claimed "crimes against humanity" were committed at Willowbrook, demanded that the three New York governors being honored at yesterday's conference — Hugh L. Carey, Mario M. Cuomo and George E. Pataki — formally apologize to the former residents and their parents.

"At that point, we might be able to say justice has prevailed," said Dr. Bronston, waving an old set of keys he said were from the institution. He continues to carry the keys with him, he said, just like he carries his "rage" over what happened at Willowbrook.

"You do owe us an apology," agreed panelist Bernard Caraballo, of Manhattan, who spent 18 years in the state school after his cerebral palsy was misdiagnosed at age 3 as mental retardation.

But others said no apologies are necessary.

"Over the years, I've come to realize there were really no angels or devils," said panelist Murray B. Schneps, a Riverhead, L.I., attorney who was a Willowbrook plaintiff on behalf of his daughter.

"I just don't believe there was a specific enemy but a generalized enemy," he said. "People make a lot of stupid mistakes. Much of what happened at Willowbrook was just people wanting to do the right thing."

"The decree is an apology," James P. Murphy, of Manhattan,

co-chairman of the event and an official with the Association for the Help of Retarded Children, said after the discussion. "And actions speak louder than words. That's an implicit apology by the state of New York."

During a question-and-answer period, many Staten Islanders in the audience expressed deep concern over recent fierce community opposition to the establishment of local residences for the developmentally disabled in some neighborhoods.

Some parents expressed frustration over the need to be continually vigilant about the care of their developmentally disabled children.

"The Willowbrook war is not over," one woman shouted from the back of the theater.

During a luncheon in the atrium of CSI's Center for the Arts, Assemblywoman Elizabeth A. Connelly (D-North Shore), who was stuck in Albany hashing out a new state budget, was recognized for her longtime commitment to the developmentally disabled.

In addition, the Staten Island Advance and TV journalist Gerardo Rivera, who was not present, were recognized for their roles in exposing the horrendous conditions at Willowbrook that helped spur the national reforms.

Rep. Vito Fossella (R-Staten Island) and Councilmen Jerome X. O'Donovan (D-North Shore), James Oddo (R-Mid-Island) and Stephen Fiala (R-South Shore) also attended the luncheon. Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani sent a representative. The councilmen and the mayor's representatives presented proclamations.

At an afternoon session, Carey, Cuomo and Pataki were presented CSI's President's Medals from Dr. Marlene Springer for their roles in transforming the state system dealing with the developmentally disabled. Maul accepted on behalf of Pataki, who, like Mrs. Connelly, was unable to attend because of budget negotiations in Albany.

Carey was honored for his efforts in negotiating a settlement to the litigation brought by more than 5,000 parents of Willowbrook children, and for signing the judgment.

"I would have swam across the Narrows to accept this," said Carey, who said he accepted the award on behalf of all those who helped shut the institution's doors. "This was a team operation."

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Cuomo was recognized for his work in continuing the implementation of the judgment and in eventually closing Willowbrook and a host of other similar state-run institutions.

"Today is a celebration, of course. But it's not enough. There's more to be done," Cuomo said, adding that society is still grappling with quality-of-life issues concerning the mentally ill, senior citizens, the uninsured and the poorest of the poor.

"There is no way to help these people except through government," he said. "That's the message of Willowbrook, too, that we come together through our government to help one another."

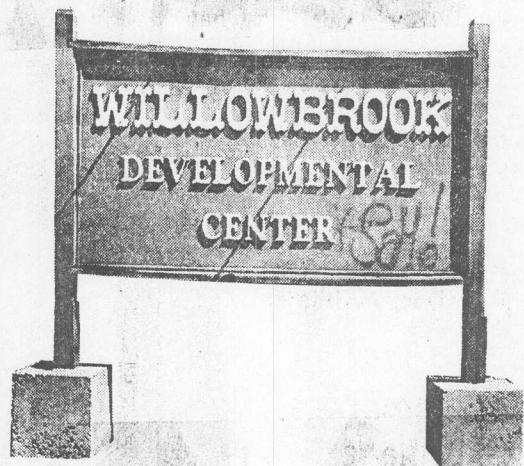
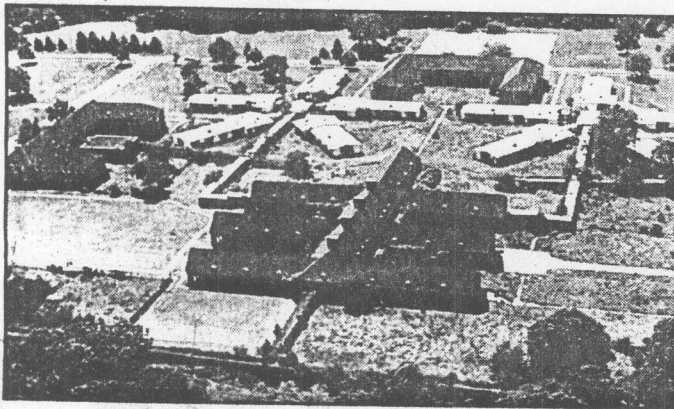
Pataki was honored for his New York State Creating Alternatives in Residential Environments and Services (NYS-CARES) initiative, which over the next four years will phase in enough community residences for the developmentally disabled to eradicate a huge waiting list.



ADVANCE PHOTO ■ IRVING SILVERSTEIN

Former Gov. Hugh Carey talks with Alice Catalano, of South Beach, a former resident of Willowbrook, during the conference in celebration of the Willowbrook consent decree.

## The Legacy of Willowbrook



1965

Staten Island Advance publishes a series of articles called "What's Wrong With Willowbrook?" examining the deteriorating conditions for the mentally retarded at the Willowbrook State School. A month later, Sen. Robert F. Kennedy conducts a surprise inspection of the institution, describing it as a "snake pit."

1967

Some 27,000 people with developmental disabilities live in New York state institutions.

1971

The Advance publishes another series exposing horrific living conditions at Willowbrook.



1972

TV documentary by relatively unknown journalist Geraldo Rivera brings the sensational Willowbrook story to the nation's consciousness, prompting widespread public outrage and a class-action lawsuit by the parents of more than 5,000 Willowbrook children against the state and then-Gov. Nelson A. Rockefeller.

1974

State schools renamed "developmental centers."

1975

Willowbrook Consent Decree signed, laying the groundwork for national reforms in the care, education and housing of people with developmental disabilities. A federal judge orders Willowbrook's population reduced to 250 by 1986, with former residents transferred to more humane environments, such as community residences.

1978

The state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities (OMRDD) begins operation as a separate entity from the Office of Mental Hygiene and is responsible for the prevention and early detection of developmental disabilities and for the care, treatment, habitation and rehabilitation of the affected population.

1978

Site Selection Law- also called the Padavan Law, named after state Sen. Frank Padavan- takes effect, creating a procedural framework for the establishment of community residences for people with developmental disabilities. The law is designed, in part, to prevent the oversaturation of houses for the developmentally disabled on a particular block or in a particular neighborhood, in essence isolating them from the wider community.

Early 1980s

Numerous local battles over the establishment of community residences for the developmentally disabled erupt across the borough.

1987

Willowbrook, at this time called the Staten Island Developmental Center, closes.

1990

President George Bush signs the Americans With Disabilities Act guaranteeing people with disabilities the same rights to employment and access to public facilities as other citizens.

1998

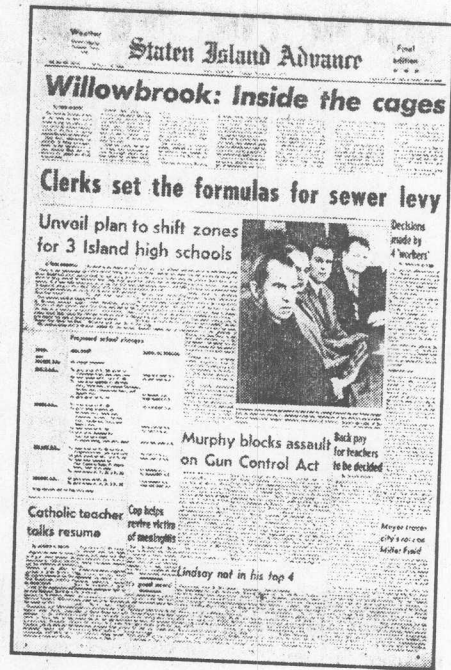
Just over 2,000 people live in state-run developmental centers.

1998

Gov. George Pataki announces New York State Creating Alternatives in Residential Environments and Services (NYS-CARES) initiative, a comprehensive five-year plan to eliminate the waiting list for out-of-home residential services throughout the state.

2000

Developmental centers population reduced to 1,000. Local human service providers say Staten Island needs about 40 new community residences in the next four years to reduce a waiting list of more than 200 Islanders.



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# THE ISLAND

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ADVANCE FILE PHOTO

Adult patients at the former Willowbrook State School were left to themselves in a virtually empty room as photographed in 1972.