

# 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 Carabello, 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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