

Life after Willowbrook 'better'

By CHRISTOPHER RINGWALD
ADVANCE SPECIAL WRITER

On the day after Thanksgiving, Martin Siegel walks to the bank to cash his paycheck. He negotiates the pedestrian traffic on 57th Avenue in Queens with care. The 44-year-old man's purple and white baseball cap bobs softly as he looks for openings among the shoppers. Cerebral palsy slows his gait and tilts his head.

At the Whitestone Savings Bank, the teller calls him by name. Siegel folds the bills she gives him into his pocket and strolls to the pharmacy next door to purchase shaving cream. After the errands, Siegel enjoys a cheeseburger with a friend in a local coffee shop. It is a new life for him.

Sixteen years ago, Siegel could not walk on the street. He could not have cashed a check — he had no job and no bank account. No teller knew him, the outside world

What has become of the former residents of the notorious Willowbrook State School? According to one state official, "life is better for all former Willowbrook patients." But is deinstitutionalization working? Find out by reading this five-part series, "Life after Willowbrook."

resident is Isabelle Weiner, who now lives in a Canarsie house with eight other women. "I hated it there, the staff beat me up all the time," she said. "It makes you hurt when they beat you up."

Melita Diaz (a pseudonym) left Willowbrook in 1979 after 25 years. Today, she lives in a South Brooklyn apartment with her 5-year-old daughter.

"When I got out, I felt so good I wanted to throw a party for myself," she recalled. "And I said I would never be put away again."

Willowbrook is officially closed. The scandalous conditions at the overcrowded and underfunded institution were pushed into the public eye by Page One stories in the Advance that were picked up by other newspapers and television stations in 1972. Scenes of naked children lying in their own defecation galvanized public support for reform.

Three years of litigation led to

the 1975 Willowbrook Consent Decree. New York agreed to provide Willowbrook residents with "the most normal living conditions possible." The decree required that patients be moved from "more to less structured living; group to individual residences; dependent to independent living." Most of the former patients have been transferred to either community-placed programs or smaller institutions.

Siegel, Weiner and Diaz are typical of residents in community-based programs. They demonstrate how many have adjusted to life outside the institution. Their lives measure New York's compliance with the court-ordered agreement that returned the patients to society. Their lives also tell about society's compliance with its ideals for the mentally retarded.

Mental retardation is often con-

(See AFTER, Page A 11)

Page
1
of
2
Pages