

Leaving mental institution meant freedom and dreams

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On the day Martin Siegel cashed his paycheck he sat in the restaurant and spoke of the changes in his life. "When I lived in Willowbrook, I could never do anything for myself. I was always inside and couldn't go out, like I do now."

His father, Hy Siegel, agreed. "Back then, Martin was nothing but a vegetable lying on a cot in front of the television." Today, Siegel said, his son has a good life.

Martin is moderately retarded. He has difficulty making associations and grasping concepts. His palsy makes eating and writing slow and laborious. In conversation, Martin is direct and has an excellent memory.

"Ask Martin anything," said his father, "the phone number of the house where he was born, birthdates of relatives. He'll remember it."

Life after Willowbrook

As did many families with mentally retarded children, the Siegels found caring for their son at home a strain on their emotions and finances. At 14, Siegel volunteered to be placed in Willowbrook, then considered a model institution. By the mid-1960s, conditions had deteriorated.

There's not much Siegel remembers about his 16 years in Buildings 5 and 10; it was an empty and deadening time.

"Willowbrook was like, mostly kids, and in those types of buildings where they're closed in all of the time. Kids were beat up. They ran all over and in the halls naked.

"The staff would use the same towels for more than one patient and so people would get rashes and

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