

For a few, life after

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The spirit of the Willowbrook Consent Decree is that people should live as much as possible as if they were not mentally retarded. Few former Willowbrook residents do, but Melita Diaz comes closer than most.

In 1954, a judge gave Diaz' mother the choice of Willowbrook or an upstate facility as homes for six of her 12 children who were handicapped. At the age of 5, Diaz was classified as mentally retarded and entered Willowbrook.

After a quarter of a century in Buildings 2, 21 and then 33, Diaz was placed with a foster family in 1979. Later she found one apartment by herself and then her current one in a housing project under the shadow of the Gowanus Expressway. She lives with her 5-year-old daughter by a former boy friend.

Sitting at a plastic-topped table in her clean, cramped apartment, Diaz remembers a life at Willowbrook degenerating. Her well-behaved, bright little girl climbs into her lap.

"When we were little it was nice there, we would go out and go to Willowbrook Park and feed the ducks," she said. "Sometimes (the staff) would take us to the forest to pick blackberries.

"But after 1960 it began to go downhill and it got crowded in 1965, 1967. The staff started to hit me in 1972. I hit back so they gave me drugs because of my attitude problem.

"They would hit us with baseball bats and pipes and call us 'retarded b-----'. It makes you feel terrible to be called that, like you're not worth anything."

Diaz took a radical approach to get out of Willowbrook. Denied her first request for release, she deliberately ate less and lost 56 pounds until she weighed 102. Alarmed, the staff approved her transfer but with little encouragement.

"One employee told me 'you'll be back within a year.' But, no, I spent 25 years there and that was enough."

Diaz' progress is followed by the Consumer Advisory Board. Anne Thompson of that office credits Diaz' drive for her independence and respects Diaz' devotion to her daughter.

Diaz is not angry about being



Life after Willowbrook

put away and remembers bi-weekly visits from her mother who faithfully brought a cooked turkey to her children every Thanksgiving.

At the same time, Diaz remembers that upon her release, "I said that if ever have a child that I would never do that with them no matter what." She strokes her daughter's hair.

"All the things I didn't have, I want for her."

When first out of Willowbrook, Diaz worked as a clerk for the Consumer Advisory Board. Bad experiences with baby sitters keeps her home now to watch her daughter. She applied for and receives public assistance on her own.

"I have a social worker but I'm not in touch with her; I'm doing fine on my own." Thompson calls and occasionally visits. Diaz manages. Each month, she stretches a combined \$282 in food stamps and welfare to cover her \$117 rent, food and other costs. Diaz wants to work again, maybe when her

daughter can fend for herself in the kitchen and on the street.

"I would like to go back to school to learn more how to read better and do times tables. I could do office work, that's what I did before. I could go to school in the nights and work part-time in the mornings."

Diaz lives as normally as possible. She knows her neighbors; she supplements her daughter's education with extra math and spelling lessons over the kitchen table; she shops and cooks; her relatives annoy and delight her. One sister crowded in with four children to stay for several weeks recently.

Several friends from Willowbrook live in group homes. Diaz visits but doesn't envy them.

"They should be teaching those people how to cook and letting them be adults," she said, and explained her creed. "The good Lord watches over me. And I don't open the door to any strangers.

"At Willowbrook, they told me that it would be very scary, that I couldn't make it out in the world

Willowbrook is quite normal