

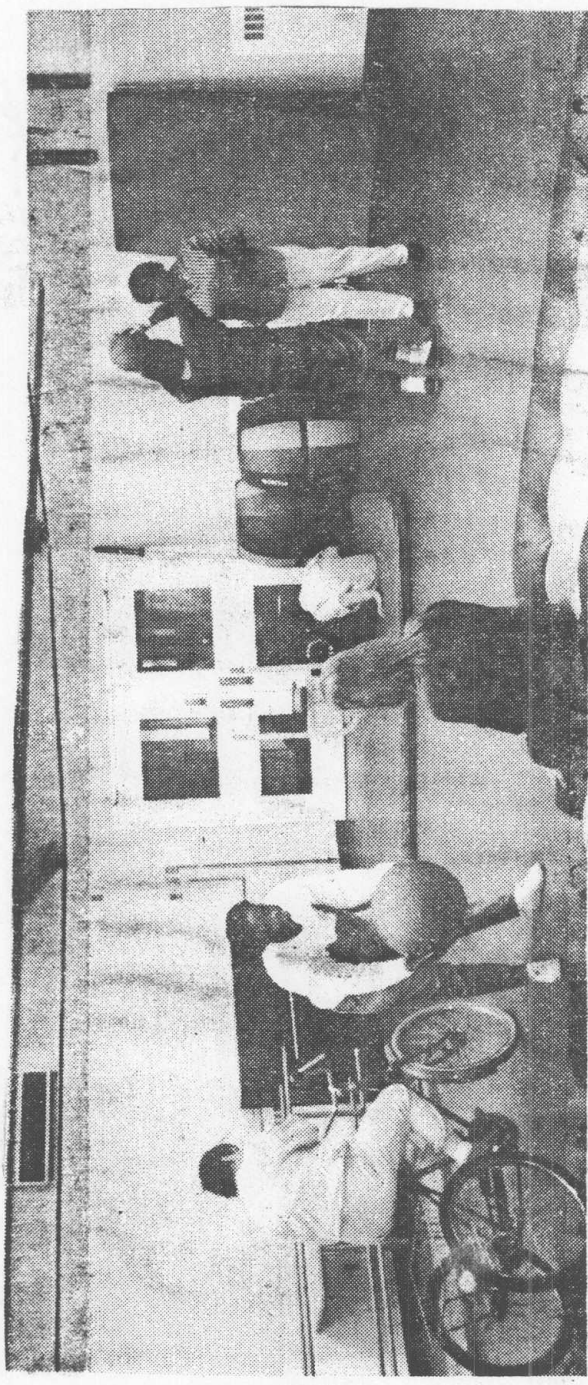
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Staten Island Advance

Lifestyle

Willowbrook

Coping with growth



Becky Nichols, left, a developmental specialist, and Faye Williams, supervisor of direct care, work with residents of the Elizabeth Connelly Community Resource Center.

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Additional pictures

By JOHN E. HURLEY
ADVANCE STAFF WRITER

It was back in 1965, a few months after the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge opened, that Howard Zavin decided to move out of Borough Park in Brooklyn and settle on Staten Island. Not content to move by himself, he and a few other friends — Martin Blush, Avery Gross, and Morton Shapiro — decided to bring a new Jewish community with them.

Zavin, then 40, asked a Staten Island friend to look around for some buildable land. A tract was found atop Todt Hill, near Ocean Terrace and Todt Hill Road. But that deal fell through. Eventually they found a promising new site in an area of Willowbrook that had once been known simply as "The Woods."

Zavin and his friends found a trio of builders, Dom Pugliese, Arthur Verhey, and Bob Zarelli, gave them plans for a one-family home they had seen and asked them to build about 40 at prices ranging from \$27,500 up to \$29,750.

They also placed a small ad in the Jewish press, inviting anyone who might be interested in joining their new orthodox Jewish congregation in the wilds of Staten Island.

Congregation is born

About 20 families signed on initially, all of them from older neighborhoods in Brooklyn, Queens, and the Bronx. And Young Israel of Staten Island was born.

"The old telephone books were calling that area 'Fairview Heights,'" Zavin said. "I guess you could say we were the pioneers in those days. A new neighborhood, new homes, and a whole new community."

Today, Young Israel has grown to more than 500 families, constituting a vibrant, growing presence in Willowbrook. Several other Jewish congregations have followed Young Israel into the community, as well as a number of Jewish businesses — a fact reflected down on Victory Boulevard, where a kosher bakery is flanked by a kosher delicatessen and a kosher pizzeria (which itself stands next to a traditional Italian pizzeria).

Growth continues

Since then, many more families of all nationalities have also found their way to Willowbrook. Once a



Our Hometown

sparsely populated community consisting primarily of winding streams and swampy wetlands, the Willowbrook of today sports acres of one-family, two-family and duplex homes, most in well-kept developments that sprang up on both sides of the new highway leading to the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge.

With those new houses have come a healthy mix of newcomers and a wide assortment of ethnic backgrounds.

At PS 54 on Willowbrook Road, built 20 years ago to accommodate the post-Bridge influx, principal Bob Herman proudly exhibits the many souvenirs he's received from students after visits to their native countries.

The gifts include a carved boat from India, a penholder from Brazil, beads from Yugoslavia, a yarmulka from a kibbutz in Israel and a desk calendar from the Philippines.

"We're very unique," Herman said, "in that we draw from a community that has an extremely diverse background. At one time we counted people coming from over 15 different countries."

This year, the school has begun providing "English as a second language" classes.

Willowbrook's vitality can also be seen down at the Todt Hill-Westerleigh Public Library branch on Victory Boulevard. Moved to the Willowbrook area in 1984 from a smaller branch in Meiers Corners, the library has quickly become the Island's busiest, and officials are already asking the city to expand it.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Willowbrook's new developments were a virtual spawning ground for young couples looking

for a place to start their families. Typical is Norwich Street, a small dead-end street off Forest Hill Road. In 1976, the block was home to 53 small children, rendering backyard birthday parties into mini-Woodstocks.

Today, said resident Lynn Santangelo, almost all of the parents and their children are still there. But those toddlers of 1976 are now in their late teens and 20s, and all of them have their own cars.

"Some houses have four or five cars now," Mrs. Santangelo said. "You have to chance it if you want a parking spot."

Similarly, on Pilcher Street, one block away, only three of the original homeowners have moved, noted Barry Milstein, whose toddlers have also grown up since he moved there in 1970. Today, Milstein has one daughter in Susan Wagner High School, another girl in Oneonta State, and another daughter who's a recent college graduate.

Like many residents in the area, Milstein complains about the bumper-to-bumper traffic that is now a twice-a-day sight along Forest Hill Road.

"It's almost impossible to leave the block at night," he said.

Indeed, Willowbrook's rapid growth has not come without problems. The community's principal thoroughfares — Willowbrook Road, Forest Hill Road, Woolley Avenue — remain little changed from pre-Bridge days, their two-lanes ill-equipped to handle increasing north-south traffic looking for routes to the other side of the Island.

Problems of growth

The coming of the College of Staten Island to land once occupied by Willowbrook State School, scheduled now for the mid-1990s at a cost of \$235.2 million, will be an economic boon to the community. But it can only exacerbate Willowbrook's traffic woes.

Much of the current traffic through Willowbrook is generated by the nearby Staten Island Mall, which has proven both a curse and a blessing to the community. The mall is an attractive convenience for Willowbrook shoppers, and also provides employment for many of Willowbrook's working

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Willowbrook

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others.

On the other hand, mall shoppers are largely responsible for the traffic woes on Forest Hill Road and Brielle Avenue. To the north of Victory Boulevard, residents in the older section of Willowbrook face similar traffic problems from motorists heading to the nearby Forest Ave. Shoppers Town.

"You can always tell when there's a sale at Macy's," Mrs. Santangelo said, "because traffic is bumper to bumper."

Construction of the area's new home developments during the late 1960s and 1970s involved re-routing, submerging or just plugging up many of Willowbrook's existing streams, which flowed down from Todt Hill and Seaview. Even Willow Brook itself, which once ran along Willowbrook Road and emptied into the swamp from which Willowbrook Pond was carved, suddenly dried up in July 1966, apparently having been illegally dammed.

The result is a need for storm sewers that still hasn't been met and apparently won't be, at least for the foreseeable future.

"It's kind of a Catch-22," Zavin said. "They keep telling us they can't widen the street because they have to put in the storm sewer first. But they say they can't put in the storm sewers because they have no money."

"It (Willowbrook) has grown up considerably, sometimes not all for the better," concedes the Rev. Joel E. A. Novey, pastor of All Saints Episcopal Church.

"Rich blending"

"But I see a rich blending of older families who have stuck with their homes and young families with small children," said Father Novey.

Like Young Israel, All Saints Episcopal moved to Willowbrook with the new Verrazano Bridge, opening in its Victory Boulevard home in 1965.

It had started many years earlier as kind of floating "annex" of the Seamen's Institute that moored in Mariners Harbor. Today, the church still recalls its nautical roots, at least in its roof, built to simulate the inverted keel of a ship.

Father Novey, who joined the congregation in 1970, said few of the original church members who made the move to Willowbrook remain there today.

"I'm probably on my third congregation of people," said Father Novey.

One measure of the changing face of the community can be seen in the many requests Father Novey receives from other congregations looking to rent church space. Most recently, All Saints Episcopal has served as a temporary home for the Martohma Church, an Indian congregation. A Korean congregation meets at the Willowbrook Park Baptist Church nearby.

Father Novey notes that even though the area is predominantly young and upscale, (the congregation's Kiddie Kampus nursery school is 19 years old), the church maintains a food pantry for Willowbrook's needy, and hosts a number of self-help groups, from Cocaine Anonymous to AA.

Sense of unity

Willowbrook residents have also proved they can band together when their community is threatened.

For a time, the neighborhood was galvanized to a boiling point by the proposed 500-bed homeless shelter that would have been built on a city-owned parcel behind PS 54. Following an agreement by the city to drop the shelter plan in return for a jail in Rossville, the land was auctioned off, with restrictions, to a developer. But Zavin, a member of Community Board 2, said the future of the parcel remains unclear.

Last year, when the Transit Authority decided to re-route the S-61 bus down Harold Street enroute to the Staten Island Mall, another firestorm of protest erupted. The T.A. agreed to re-study the route, but hasn't changed it.

More recently, following a rash of thefts and burglaries, residents, at the prompting of police, formed a neighborhood block watch program.

John Petito, one of the residents who joined the program, says he's less worried about crime these days than he is about the growing Fresh Kills Landfill and the poor condition of the nearby roads.

"Richmond Hill Road is a minefield," Petito says.

Petito hastens to add that generally he likes life in Willowbrook — the neighbors, the convenience. But he said problems seemed to get solved quicker and more efficiently back in his old Queens neighborhood.

"The politicians there were much better," Petito said. "Whenever anything happened, we'd get it taken care of."

Government funds

Nevertheless, government dollars are flowing into Willowbrook. Millions of them.

At Willowbrook Park, for example, where many an Island youngster has enjoyed catching some of the fish stocked in man-made Willowbrook Pond, the first phase of a \$1.2 million improvement project is now underway.

Two years ago, the park had become the Island's No. 1 marijuana market, partially because of its easy access from both Victory Boulevard and the nearby Staten Island Expressway.

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Increased police patrols have stemmed the action, and the park's renovation will involve closing the Victory Boulevard entrance to discourage the dealers.

Willowbrook Park will also be getting six new tennis courts, and a new gravel topping for its traditionally axle-destructive roads. The \$1.2 million project will also put an asphalt pedestrian walkway around the edge of the lake, making it accessible to the handicapped.

The park's 180 acres were purchased in 1928, and Willowbrook Pond, covering five acres, was actually the first man-made lake ever built on Staten Island. It was constructed in 1932 by then-Parks Commissioner John J. O'Rourke, who planned the lake on the site of an old swamp.

Now, the lake itself will be dredged and a new 30-car parking lot will be added. Future phases of the renovation may also include re-doing the park's log cabin-style

boathouse.

Walking through the old Willowbrook State School a short distance away, one almost expects to see tumbleweed blowing around the abandoned buildings and fields.

CSI on the way

But big plans are in place for the sprawling facility, where the College of Staten Island is set to occupy 216 acres on a new unified campus.

CSI will renovate 16 existing buildings and build 520,000 square feet of new space. Nine existing buildings will be torn down to make way for the new college.

The state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities (OMRDD) will retain 140 acres of Willowbrook's land, from which it will run the borough's support services for the handicapped.

Also staying will be the Richmond Complex, a colony of three

group homes, which serves 115 clients, located off Forest Hill Road. The property also houses the Elizabeth A. Connelly Community Resource Center, which serves 70 profoundly retarded clients with behavioral problems.

But to most Islanders, the sprawling complex of ~~and~~ brick buildings will always be known simply as "Willowbrook."

During the mid-1960s, more than 6,000 residents, the quarters of them multi-handicapped, were housed there. Willowbrook State School at its peak employed more than 4,000 staffers, making it the single largest employer on the Island. But staff-to-patient ratios were woefully low, between 1 to 30 and 1 to 40.

In 1965, the late Sen. Robert F. Kennedy toured Willowbrook and was appalled at the conditions there. But it wasn't until the early 1970s that the real push for reform came, leading in 1975 to the Willowbrook Consent Decree.

That ruling approved by a federal judge and signed by then Gov. Hugh Carey, mandated the movement of all but 250 of Willowbrook's residents out into smaller, community-based group homes. The initial deadline for accomplishing this was 1976, but resistance in the community to group homes caused several changes in that deadline.

In 1981, there were still 900 residents in the facility. It wasn't until April 1986 that the target population of 250 had been reached.

In January 1981, Willowbrook State School officially became the Staten Island Developmental Center, and since then, the Staten Island Developmental Disabilities Service Office (SIDDSO).

SIDDSO is responsible for referring any Staten Islander with developmental disabilities to the appropriate program here.

Up on Forest Hill Road nearby is the imposing concrete and glass structure housing the Institute for Basic Research in Mental Retardation. With more than 250 employees and a \$15 million-plus annual budget, it is the only facility in the state devoted solely to researching mental retardation and developmental disabilities.

Over the years, IBR's staff has made scientific advances towards finding cures for autism, Down's Syndrome, Fragile X syndrome and Alzheimer's disease, among others.

The potential offered by the proximity of all these facilities hasn't been lost on Rabbi Jay Marcus, the energetic leader of Young Israel.

Young Israel growing

Among other things, Rabbi Marcus says he wants to set up a program in the congregation for children suffering from cerebral palsy. And he hopes to see a Jewish Studies Program at the new CSI when that opens.

"It's ridiculous how many of our young people I have to send over to Baruch (College) or Yeshiva."

These days, Young Israel is busy caring for 90 Russian Jews who have been staying at the old Conca D'Oro hotel in Mariners Harbor, part of a larger contingent that fled the Soviet Union in early October.

By mobilizing Young Israel's vast energy and resources to their aid, he'll be able to help most of the Russians find housing and work in the area.

Rabbi Marcus said he was just completing his rabbinical studies at Yeshiva University when his wife Barbara first spotted that small advertisement in the Jewish Press, back in the late 1960s.

A rabbinical position in Toronto was also available, but Mrs. Marcus prevailed on her husband Jay to join the 100 applicants for the job at the tiny new congregation on Staten Island.

"Like most new rabbis, I rented first," Rabbi Marcus recalls. "You never know how these things will work out. When I first came here, I had the occasional circumcision or bar mitzah. Now I could have 30 weddings."

Initially, Young Israel services were conducted in members' homes. A small cinderblock synagogue was built in 1967, and on April 5, 1981, Young Israel connected it to its large, new synagogue, complete with a banquet-size reception hall, classrooms for its pre-schoolers, and a gym for both rabbis and synagogue members alike.

"We didn't lay the tile ourselves," said Rabbi Marcus. "But we painted and we swept. You could say it was built with the sweat of the people here."

The congregation now even hosts its own Jewish Little League for its youngsters, whose Sabbath observance always prevented them from participating in organized Little League.

Often, residents of modern middle-class communities like Willowbrook are vilified for their lack of community spirit and purpose. That doesn't seem true in this community, where church and school seem to dominate the daily social fabric.

Perhaps the fact that so many of Willowbrook's residents are still there, 25 years after they came over the new bridge to find their American dream, is the best testament to the area's appeal.

Rabbi Marcus, for one, says he wouldn't leave Willowbrook "for anywhere on earth."

"It's the people. They're college educated. They believe in society; they believe that Judaism has an important message to offer. Outside of Israel, it's the best place to be."

The Advance has already profiled the following towns:
Travis, Great Kills, Port Richmond, Annadale, Castleton Corners/Melers Corners, Emerson Hill, St. George, Charleston, New Brighton, New Springville, South Beach, Concord, Tottenville, Mariners Harbor, Oakwood, Stapleton, Westerleigh, Huguenot, Richmond, Fort Wadsworth, Livingston, New Dorp, Eltingville, Todt Hill, Clifton and Willowbrook.

Next week's article looks at Dongan Hills.

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