

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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