

TV reporter has a history of filching stories

How Geraldo rode plagiarism to fame: Now it can be told

BY ADVANCE STAFF WRITER

Nearly two months before Geraldo Rivera turned television cameras onto the inhumanity at what was then known as Willowbrook State School, an Advance reporter had uncovered the horrific conditions at the now-closed institution, and this newspaper published the facts along with photos depicting conditions there.

Rivera, who rode the plight of the severely retarded people in Willowbrook like a rocket to success, is still viewed by Advance Editor Les Trautmann as having unethically taking credit for the story.

"At that time, he (Rivera) never acknowledged our stories. He positioned himself like he was the one who had done the whole thing," Trautmann said.

The editor's assertions came only a day after a Manhattan tabloid reported that NBC newsman Chuck Scarborough has charged Rivera with plagiarizing

his Emmy award-winning report on airport security. The Scarborough report was aired in February 1990, and looked at the tightening and later slackening of airport security in the wake of the Pan Am Flight 103 disaster in 1988.

Rivera's story, which focused on airport security before and after the Persian Gulf war, was telecast last week on his show "Now It Can Be Told."

Rivera had gained new attention in recent weeks, not for grabbing ratings, but for revealing his romantic trysts in a kiss-and-tell book.

Rivera's autobiography includes a self-glamorizing portrayal of the Willowbrook State School story, with Rivera in a "warrior mode" charging into the facility at breakneck speed with a camera crew to raid one of the now-infamous buildings for some film footage. Willowbrook State School later became known as

doctor, Mike Wilkens, called Rivera in January 1972, he went in with the doctor and a camera crew.

What Rivera found, was what Ms. Kurtin had already reported. In her series she went behind the walls of the institution, bringing to Staten Islanders stories of overcrowded wards, retarded children wandering half-naked and starving, young men forced to sleep, eat and defecate in a single concrete room.

She described forgotten patients, including a boy who went blind because a condition, which could have been altered with an operation, was neglected until he was beyond help. She described a girl she called Patty, who had all of her teeth pulled because she bit another patient.

Ms. Kurtin called Rivera "an opportunist" in a telephone interview Friday, admitting that Rivera created for himself the illusion that he had broken the story.

"That was showmanship, it wasn't real," she said, referring to Rivera's staged exploits of climb-



Geraldo Rivera

ing fences or rushing in through a web of security. "You could just walk right through the front," she added.

"It was a terrible, terrible moment," she said, recalling the revelation she experienced covering the scandal.

Ms. Kurtin said she did not think there was much she could

say about the now 20-year-old story that would add to it at this point. She called the attention focused on Rivera as "the old story of print and TV," and said she was almost embarrassed to discuss her role.

Rivera details how Willowbrook made him a celebrity in "Exposing Myself," and his selfishness with the story. He says he would not return phone calls from City Council President Andrew Stein because "It was my story, not his." He also bombastically claims: "I would liberate these children."

Trautmann remains miffed with Rivera's claim to the story. He recalled working on establishing the Advance as "more than just another newspaper" for Staten Island.

Trautmann also recalled how an executive of a major wire news service said to him at the time, "Geraldo's maneuvers have cost you a Pulitzer Prize."

That was unconscionably unfair to Ms. Kurtin, Trautmann said.

The former Willowbrook State School was closed in 1987.