

Lauded for work with disabled

Ex-Willowbrook client earns kudos

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ALBANY — Bernard Carabello, who overcame years of adversity and confinement in the infamous Willowbrook State School, received a state award yesterday for his outstanding work on behalf of people with disabilities.

Carabello, 42, who has cerebral palsy, spent 18 years of his life at the former Willowbrook institution when it was notoriously overcrowded and understaffed.

Carabello, who was misplaced in Willowbrook, was a catalyst in organizing protests against the institution's conditions. He was released in 1972 and became an advocate for people with disabilities, helping to spur improvements in New York's service system.

"We need to educate the young

people of tomorrow about what we started 20 years ago," Carabello said after accepting the New York State Victory Award.

The award, sponsored by the National Rehabilitation Hospital in Washington, D.C., honors an outstanding individual with disabilities from each state. Gov. Mario M. Cuomo selected Carabello this year.

Carabello founded the Self-Advocacy Association of New York State in 1986. It has grown to include 43 local groups composed of hundreds of people with developmental disabilities across the state. The state association assists local groups and informs elected officials about issues related to independent living, personal choice and program flexibility and accountability.

"We still have a hell of a lot of work to do," Carabello told supporters and advocates during a ceremony in the state Capitol. "It's a lot better than 20 years ago but we still have a lot to learn about treatment and care for people who are mentally retarded."

Carabello remembered being a resident of Building 7, considered one of the worst wards in Willowbrook. He credited the Advance for publishing the "first expose" on the institution, which was overhauled and renamed the Staten Island Developmental Center before closing in 1987. He also praised the work of television reporter Geraldo Rivera.

He said he was pleased that a new College of Staten Island campus is being built on the grounds. Carabello, who now resides in Manhattan and is executive director of the Self-Advocacy Association, said he is clearly worried about additional layoffs slated for

the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities. On May 6, as many as 360 workers could be getting pink slips under Cuomo's budget proposal.

Carabello said he didn't want to see a retreat from the gains made in treatment for persons with disabilities. He noted that the Willowbrook Consent Decree ordering the state to provide a certain level of services expires this November.

"I'm afraid the quality of care will start to go down and we'll end up in court again. The layoffs are beginning to take their toll in terms of quality of care," he said.

Elin Howe, commissioner of the office of mental retardation, presented Carabello with the award. Cuomo, who was in budget meetings, did not attend. Karen Carpenter-Palumbo, the governor's assistant secretary for human services, spoke on Cuomo's behalf.