

Second front

EDITORIAL

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 10, 1993

Decree brings final end to 'Willowbrook days'



Laura Bruno

ABOUT STATEN ISLAND



Mrs. Steuernagel hangs on to her daughter as they embrace.

The horror past, Patricia Parisi smiles as if she never knew pain, as if perhaps there were some mistake and this exuberant 40-year-old woman-child had not endured the sins of Willowbrook. Yet her smile is the ultimate proof that she did.

A gap in Patricia's upper front teeth testifies to the abuse and neglect suffered by thousands of mentally retarded residents at the defunct institution in the heart of Staten Island.

Unruly and requiring attention that was unheard of on the filthy, overcrowded wards of the Willowbrook State School, Patricia's teeth were removed to prevent her from biting other residents, explained her mother, Lena Steuernagel of Port Richmond.

"The liars — they told us the doctor took her front teeth out because they were worried about her biting her tongue since she's epileptic," Mrs. Steuernagel said. "I knew why they did it."

So she didn't hesitate for a moment when, more than 20 years ago, she was asked to testify in court about conditions at Willowbrook. There was no thought of future historical significance, of course, just the determination of a mother to do whatever she could to protect her child.

Tomorrow though, Mrs. Steuernagel will have to pause to consider her place, and that of her daughter, in facilitating the landmark Willowbrook Consent Decree. The final settlement of the 1975 decree, which spurred massive reform statewide in the care and housing of people with developmental disabilities, will be signed in Brooklyn federal court.

The decree resulted from a 1972 class action brought by the New York Civil Liberties Union. The lawsuit was titled: "New York State Association for Retarded Children, et. al and Parisi, et. al. v. Rockefeller." The final injunction, which will replace the consent decree, includes detailed provisions for the continued monitoring of services for the developmentally disabled.

Patricia Parisi may not comprehend her role as a "name plaintiff" against the state of New York, but today she understands what it is to feel safe and nurtured in a place where she once knew only fear.

The Willowbrook Consent Decree is responsible for moving thousands of developmentally disabled

(See DECREE, Page A 15)