

Second front

EDITORIAL

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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

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ADVANCE PHOTOS/JAN SOMMA

Patricia Parisi, left, has a hug and a kiss for her mother, Lena Steuernagel.

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people from institutions into smaller, community-based residences. Ironically, Patricia Parisi is one of 120 clients who continue to live on the former state school's grounds in a group of homes known as the Richmond Complex.

The Willowbrook State School, whose campus had housed the Halloran military hospital during World War II, opened in 1951 with 2,450 developmentally disabled children. In 1962, Willowbrook's census peaked at 6,200, nearly double its intended capacity of 3,500.

Following a visit in 1965, Sen. Robert F. Kennedy described it as bordering on a "snakepit."

In the early 1970s, the Advance exposed the grisly conditions at the institution, and TV reporter Geraldo Rivera brought the story to a wider audience. Following the media attention, the class action was filed March 17, 1972.

Willowbrook, which later became the Staten Island Developmental Center, officially closed Sept. 17, 1987.

Today, in addition to the Richmond Complex, the campus also houses rehabilitative day programs for the developmentally disabled. The Staten Island Developmental Disabilities Services Office, which oversees services for borough clients, also is located on the grounds.

Every Friday, Mrs. Steuernagel, 70, and her husband, Herman, 71, pick up Patricia from her day program for her weekend visit home. And every Friday, Patricia topples her mother with a hug and a huge kiss.

They stop at Patricia's house on the grounds to check out before leaving.

Instead of living 50 to a room in a barracks, as she did in what Mrs. Steuernagel calls "the Willowbrook days," Patricia has her own bedroom in a supervised

house for eight females.

"It's like a family," Mrs. Steuernagel said. She has nothing but praise for the care her daughter receives, and she couldn't say enough about Patricia's residence supervisor, Charlotte Young, or Robert Witkowsky, director of the borough services office.

"Bob — he is the best director we ever had," Mrs. Steuernagel said. "He will go out of his way to help a parent and the child. His main concern is always the child first."

She only wishes someone might have been so attentive when Patricia and thousands of other children were suffering there.

Mrs. Steuernagel put off placing Patricia at Willowbrook as long as she could, until the child was 7. Twice, Mrs. Steuernagel pulled her daughter out, but Patricia could not be controlled at home.

At Willowbrook, Patricia was unable to explain why her mother so often found her bruised and cut.

"Week after week in Building 22, she'd have a black eye," her mother said. Attendants, and sometimes even doctors, shrugged off her injuries as results of Patricia's seizures. Mrs. Steuernagel remembers unsuccessfully hounding staff to find out why her daughter had stitches on her head one day.

Mrs. Steuernagel worked at Willowbrook for many years herself, so she knew without being told where the cuts and bruises came from; she had seen how some staffers treated other residents.

Mrs. Steuernagel at least felt she was taking steps for her daughter's protection by photographing the girl's injuries.

When the time came, she took stacks of pictures into the courtroom.

She still has some extras at home. Not surprisingly, there is no sign of Patricia's smile in any of the photos.

But check out her face when she sees her Mom every Friday afternoon. And stay out of their way.



ADVANCE PHOTO/JAN SOMMA

Patricia Parisi is proud of her room in a group home. Her mom, Lena Steuernagel, at the door, says it is a far cry from the conditions Patricia lived in at the former Willowbrook State School.

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