

# Big Day for Ex-Willowbrook Residents

Continued From Page A1

in the care of the mentally retarded have provided a life of dignity for thousands of people once written off as incurable "mental defectives" and have provided a model for other states around the country, the speakers at the court hearing said.

"The people at Willowbrook were not dumped into shelters or left to fend for themselves on the street," said Robert Levy, a lawyer for the New York Civil Liberties Union, which filed the Willowbrook suit in 1972.

While the state faltered in creating group homes for the mentally ill released from hospitals — many of whom ended up homeless — it delivered for the mentally retarded.

The difference can largely be traced to the involvement of the Federal courts on behalf of the retarded and the clear, simple solution it enforced, said David J. Rothman, a historian who wrote "The Willowbrook Wars" (Harper & Row, 1984) with his

## An 'Extraordinary' Effort

"The effort to move the most handicapped citizens out of institutions was extraordinary," he said. "And in the end it stands as a stunning example of what can be done in community treatment."

In 1965, there were 26,000 mentally retarded people in New York State living in institutions and only a handful in community residences. Today, 26,000 live in 4,746 community residences scattered across the state. Fewer than 5,000 remain in institutions.

But parents of mentally retarded children are quick to note that there is still much unfinished business remaining: there are 12,000 people on waiting lists for group homes in New York.

Willowbrook, a sprawling campus with dozens of buildings on hundreds of acres, is closed now and the buildings have become part of Staten Island Community College.

Beginning in the late 1940's, Willowbrook offered a mean, often desperate existence to thousands of mentally retarded people. By 1962, there were 6,200 people there, 2,000 more than its capacity. The complex was overcrowded and drastically understaffed. As many as 60 extremely disabled people were packed into one big locked room during the day, for years on end, with only a few attendants to supervise.

Neglect was endemic. There were not enough chairs, so residents lay on the floor or in cribs. And there were



Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times

Federal Judge John R. Bartels, who yesterday ended 18 years supervising former residents of Willowbrook State School. Of the survivors, most severely or profoundly retarded, most now live in group homes.

not enough clothes, so they often wore rags or nothing at all.

Many could not feed themselves, and the shortage of workers meant residents often did not eat properly. The lack of supervision also allowed unchecked violence among the bored, despairing residents.

John Emro frequently visited his stepson, Scott, who could not walk, talk or feed himself. Mr. Emro remembers a room filled with young, lonely retarded people desperate for affection. "They'd hug you so tight it scared people," he said. "It was hard to get rid of them."

## Shocking Images

Over the years there were brief flurries of attention. In 1965, Robert F. Kennedy made a surprise visit and denounced Willowbrook as "a snake-pit" where children lived in filth. Still, nothing much changed.

And in 1971 the State Legislature slashed funds for Willowbrook, further cutting its already inadequate staff.

The deepening crisis radicalized some of the doctors and parents. They went public for the first time.

## Court supervision ends over those who left a center for the retarded.

They picketed the administration building, blocked traffic on the street and talked to reporters.

But it was a television report by Geraldo Rivera on ABC News, on Jan. 6, 1972, that catapulted Willowbrook into the national consciousness.

An outspoken doctor dismissed from his position at Willowbrook smuggled the reporter into one of the wards. A handheld camera captured shocking images: naked children on the floor, walls smeared with feces, a room virtually barren of furniture.

Two months later, the New York Civil Liberties Union sued the state on behalf of the New York State Association for Retarded Children in Federal court. In 1975, soon after Hugh L.