



Ozier Muhammad/The New York Times

"You could smell her," said Willie Mae Goodman, left, describing her daughter, Margaret, as a 4-year-old resident of Willowbrook. "Her little toes would

be so chaffed I had to pull them apart. I had to cut her hair short it was so matted." Margaret, now 37 lives in a state-financed group home in Manhattan.

Carey became Governor, the state signed a consent decree with the plaintiffs, starting the single largest effort at deinstitutionalizing of the retarded in the nation.

It was a fortuitous meeting of the minds between the civil-liberties lawyers and the new Governor. Peter C. Goldmark, now president of the Rockefeller Foundation, was then Mr. Carey's budget director and negotiated the deal.

He had handled a similar case when he was Secretary of Human Services in Massachusetts. He was a believer in group homes. So instead of pouring millions into improving Willowbrook, building "a shinier prison," as Mr. Goldmark put it, he and the plaintiffs decided Willowbrook should cease to exist.

Over the last 18 years, two Federal judges, Orrin Judd and, after his death in 1976, Mr. Bartels, issued more than 50 orders and opinions and held more than 100 hearings as they prodded a sometimes balky state to follow through on the promise of community-based care for the mentally retarded.

In 1987, Willowbrook itself was closed, but many of its residents still remained in institutions. It was not until the end of 1992 that all but about 150 of the former Willowbrook residents had been moved to group homes, leading to yesterday's closing ceremony.

Crystal-Clear Message

At the hearing, state officials, lawyers and advocates for the retarded offered the soaring oratory of principles established and rights gained. But it was the people who lived the horrors of Willowbrook who brought the day down to earth. Their voices were garbled and distorted by their disabilities, but their meaning was crystal-clear.

Gary Cohen, 46, hobbled to the podium. A diminutive man born with spina bifida, he was placed in Willowbrook when he was 3 years old and lived there 24 years. Since he has left the institution, he said, he has learned to clothe himself and to add and to read.

He read haltingly from a statement he had written, and he did not flinch from the memory of Willowbrook:

"There was feces all over the place. It was the worst place I ever been in."

'A Long Way'

Robert Cantor rolled to the podium in a wheelchair, his arm curled in a permanent arc. "I'm married now," he said. "I've come a long way from Willowbrook. Thank you, commissioner of human whatever you call it." That got a big laugh from the audience.

A bit later, the 95-year-old judge had the last word. He sat alone on the bench in his black robes, a vast wall of white marble behind him. He spoke with a certain solemnity and sense of moment as he held his speech close to his eyes.

He paid homage to the parents whose love and work "on the outside brought progress on the inside." He recalled the state's resistance to some of his orders.

And finally, the Republican judge, first appointed to a state court by Gov. Thomas E. Dewey, concluded with a sentence that echoed Selma and Montgomery: "The retarded have really overcome and social justice has prevailed."