

Willowbrook's past reaches into present

History of campus put in perspective at CSI seminar

A Jack Gorelick was not impressed with the lunch he ate in the Cafeteria yesterday. He was, however, stirred by "the life, the vibrancy" on the Willowbrook campus. "To get a sense of a new mission" was overwhelming, he said.

It almost overshadowed the stench of the old Willowbrook State School. But he will never be rid of the fetid smell of human feces and urine that characterized an era of inhumane treatment of the mentally retarded.

Willowbrook — Now and Then" was the subject of a seminar yesterday that was part of the dedication of CSI's psychology, sociology and anthropology building. The college, which is part of the City University of New York, opened its newly consolidated campus last fall on the grounds of the old state school for the mentally retarded.

Gorelick, a psychologist who was involved with the closing of Willowbrook, and other speakers credited the college for understanding the need to remember the past.

"If we don't know where we're coming from, we don't know where we're going," he said.

CSI plans to install "Willowbrook: People, Place and Time," a permanent multimedia exhibit tracing the history of the institu-

tion and those who lived and worked there. Smaller displays will be scattered around the campus, chronicling the history of particular sites.

When the Willowbrook State School occupied the campus, "You would see these wonderful lawns, and there was nobody out," Gorelick said. He would tell morning visitors not to eat breakfast before arriving to spare them from vomiting.

"The stench was something if you ever experienced it, you'll never forget it. I could smell it here today. I can hear the echoes,

I can hear the screams. I can see the people running around naked, battering each other," he said.

Dark gray walls and floors created a prison-like atmosphere on wards where 50 to 75 children were supposedly watched by two staff members, said Murray Schneps, whose daughter lived at Willowbrook.

"People who were harmless and helpless were being destroyed where we sit," he said.

As an attorney, Schneps became involved in the 1972 class action lawsuit that led to the landmark Willowbrook Consent De-



Laura Bruno
ABOUT STATEN ISLAND

people with developmental abilities and has led to the closing of many institutions.

It started with little things ensuring the basics of food

cree in 1975. The court-ordered agreement spurred massive reform in the care and housing of

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individual sets of clothes for each resident, said Robert Witkowsky, who worked at Willowbrook and is now director of the Staten Island Disabilities Services Office. The decree called for individual storage lockers for residents, who formerly slept in their shoes or with their belongings stuffed in their shirts, he said.

A year ago today, the settlement of the decree was signed in Brooklyn federal court. The final injunction includes provisions for the continued monitoring of services for the developmentally disabled.

Willowbrook, which became the Staten Island Developmental Center, officially closed in September 1987.

Gary Cohen, a former resident of Willowbrook who now lives in a Brooklyn residence run by the Young Adult Institute, was beaten by a staff member when he was at the institution.

"It was the worst place," he said, reading from a statement. Though life is unequivocally better in the community residence, Cohen said he needs more support from the system to find a job and live in an even more independent setting.

"The lesson we've learned is that we should listen — and not to the professionals; listen to the individuals themselves whenever possible and to their families," said James Walsh, associate commissioner of the state Office of Mental

Retardation/Developmental Disabilities and a former employee and director of the Willowbrook institution.

"That is where we're headed in the 1990s," he said. "Person-centered planning. In North Carolina, they have a wonderful program. They don't talk about services and residential opportunities, as we

still do. A person comes in with a set of needs and a team listens."

The approach is light years from anything used when 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, the institution's census peaked at 6,200, nearly double its intended capacity of 3,500.

In 1971, a 21-year-old Advance reporter, Jane Kurtin, exposed the hideous conditions at Willowbrook in a chilling series of articles. Within two months, TV reporter Geraldo Rivera picked up the story and brought it nationwide attention.

The class action was brought against the state the following year, on behalf of 5,300 Willowbrook school residents.

Of all the forces that helped spur reform, the most important may have been the parents, Gorelick said.

Among many professionals in the cramped, understaffed institution, "there was an overwhelming sense of apathy and hopelessness," he said.

Those who stood up for change often were fired, Schneps said.

Years ago, he believed the cruelty of Willowbrook was the result of negative intent by everyone involved with the institution, he said. Today he realizes "there was some negative intent by some people. But what really caused Willowbrook was ignorance and fear."

CSI's move to the campus "does my heart good," Schneps said. "A college is the antidote to both ignorance and fear."

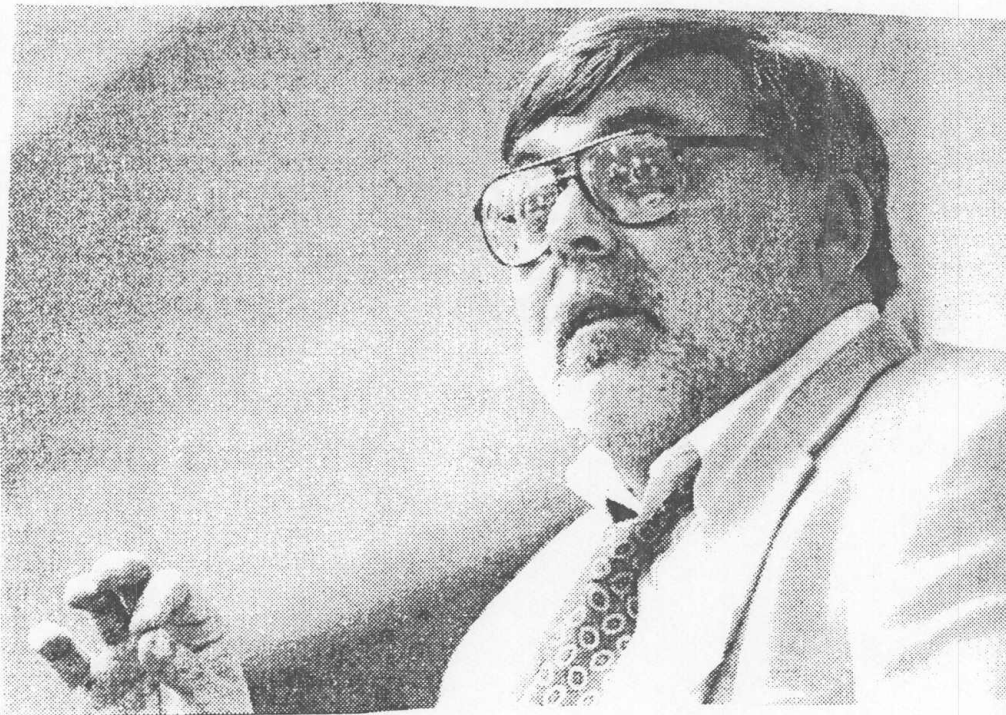


Jack Gorelick, who was involved in the closing of the Willowbrook State School, spoke about some of the horrors that took place at the institution.

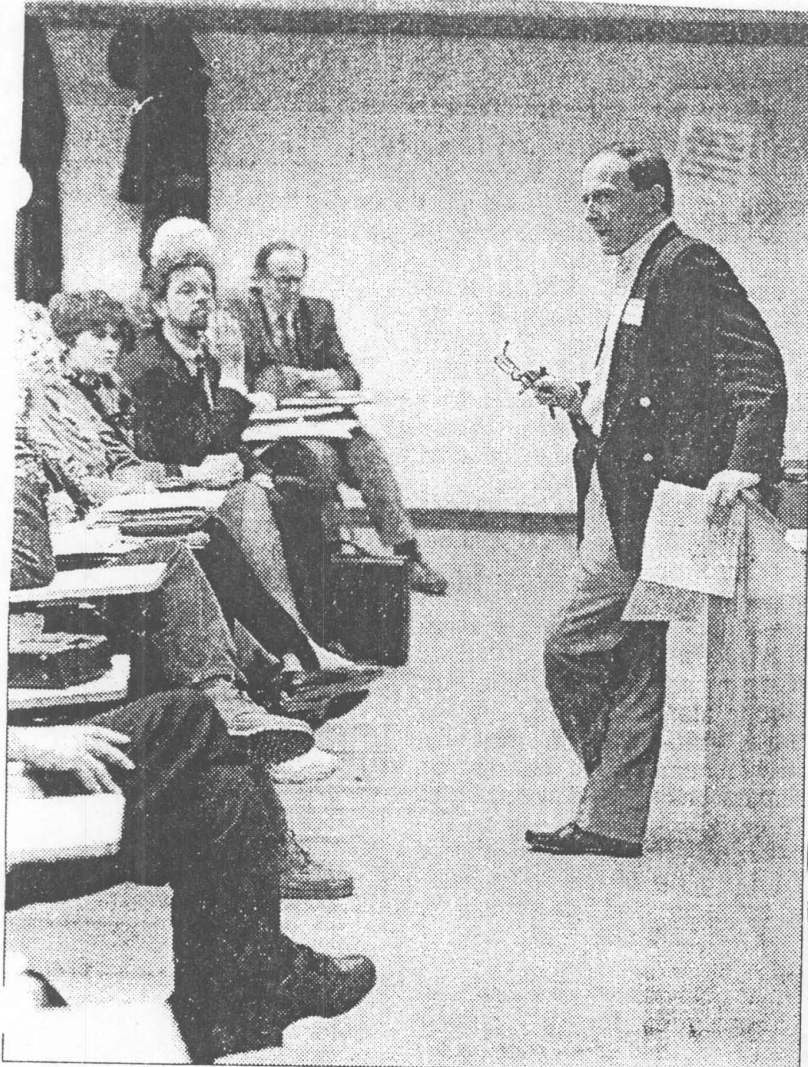
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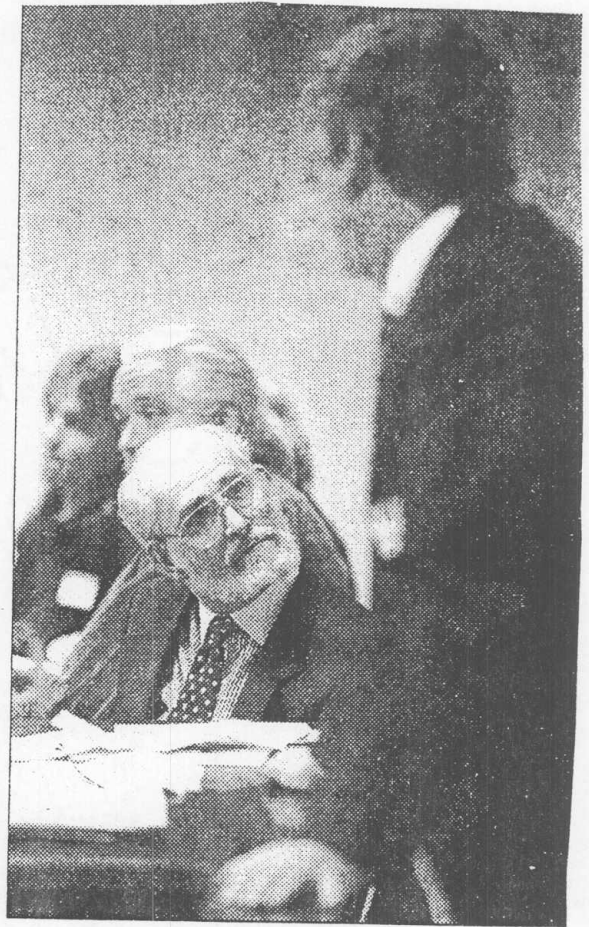
Disabilities professionals listen to stories about the former Willowbrook State School.



Robert Witkowski, director of Staten Island Developmental Disabilities Services, spoke at the dedication.

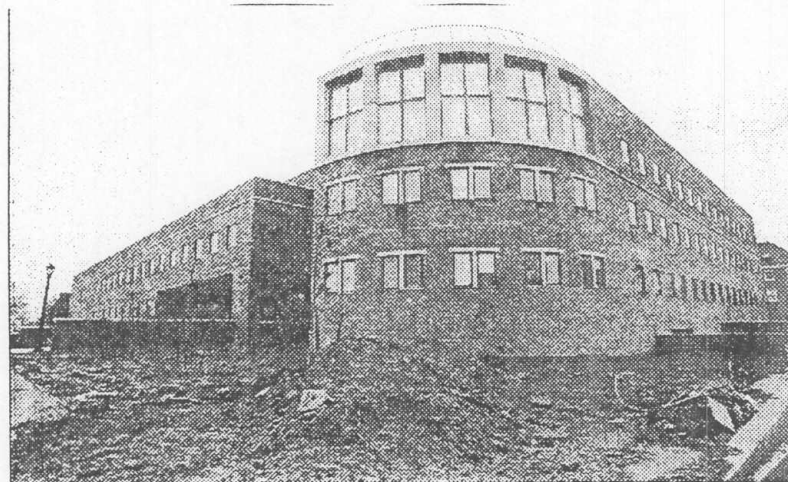


Ethan Ellis, director of New Jersey Developmental Disabilities Planning Council, listens to speaker James Walsh.



ADVANCE PHOTOS/MIKE FALCO

Murray Schneps, a lawyer and parent who played a critical role in the closing of Willowbrook State School, speaks during the building dedication.



The newly dedicated building at the Willowbrook campus of the College of Staten Island.

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Gary Cohen, a former resident of Willowbrook State School, smiles during the dedication of the new building at the Willowbrook campus of the College of Staten Island.

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