

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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