

Remembering Willowbrook

Through good days and bad, a patient's smile made it all worthwhile

When Sen. Robert F. Kennedy visited Willowbrook State School in 1965 and described it as bordering on a snake pit, Norma Allison couldn't help but be hurt. She was doing the best she could taking care of mentally retarded adults in Building 27 on the sprawling campus. It seemed she was constantly changing their diapers, feeding or bathing them. They couldn't talk, so she taught herself to read their faces, to speak to them with gestures and her eyes. They were like children, many with physical disabilities in addition to their retardation, but Ms. Allison recognized that each had his or her own personality. So she took the young senator's characterization of Willowbrook somewhat personally. She had heard stories about bad conditions in other buildings, and she knew her own was overcrowded and understaffed, but she took pride in her work and she cared about



ADVANCE PHOTO ■ JAN SOMMA

Norma Allison worked for more than 36 years at Willowbrook State School and the facilities that succeeded it.

were open to the vast improvements that grew out of public criticism.

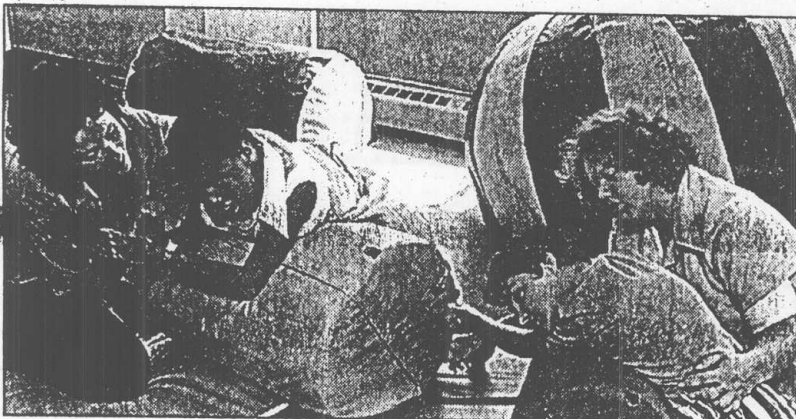
After giving more than 36 years in direct care at Willowbrook and the facilities that succeeded it, 55-year-old Norma Allison of West Brighton retired earlier this month and recently spoke to the Advance about all that she witnessed at one of the nation's most notorious institutions.

She reflected not on Willowbrook's painful past, but on all the people she worked with and who cared deeply about the clients and were eager to learn better ways to administer that care. She is proud to be part of Willowbrook's legacy of change.



LAURA BRUNO

ABOUT STATEN ISLAND



ADVANCE FILE PHOTO

Instructors assist Willowbrook residents in play therapy in 1975.

the patients.

Kennedy stopped by around supper time one September evening in 1965. Though it was a surprise inspection, "We were told he was looking for a place for his sister," Ms. Allison said. Kennedy's sister, Rosemary Kennedy, was born with mental retardation.

But if Ms. Allison and some of her colleagues felt wrongly accused by the negative publicity that ensued over the following years, they also

PLEASE SEE WILLOWBROOK, PAGE A 15

7 AXED 90
1-31-96