

# Remembering Willowbrook

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

**W**hen 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.

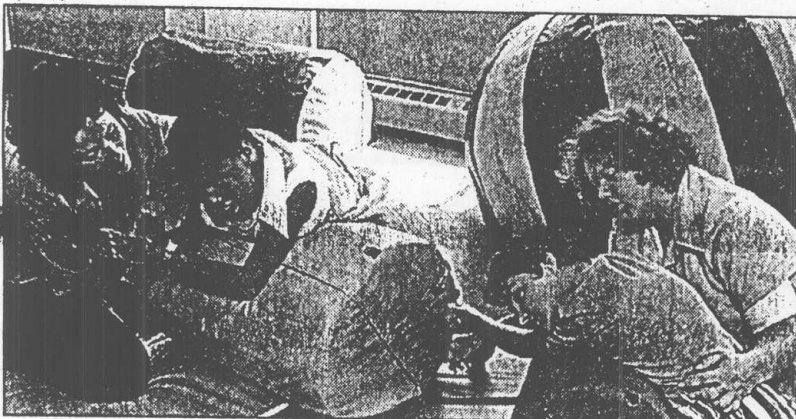
After giving more than 36 years in direct care at Willowbrook and the facilities that succeeded it, 55-year-old Norma Allison of West Brighton retired earlier this month and recently spoke to the Advance about all that she witnessed at one of the nation's most notorious institutions.

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

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Nurses assist children with their drawing in this photograph taken in the "baby building" at Willowbrook in 1965.

# Willowbrook

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The landmark Willowbrook Consent Decree of 1975, which arose from a class action lawsuit on behalf of 5,300 residents of the school, laid the groundwork for statewide reform in the care, education and housing of people with developmental disabilities.

Ms. Allison recalled a new supervisor directing her and other staff members to take clients for a walk.

"We didn't know if they could stand," she said. "But we got everyone outside, ... and lo and behold, some of them could stand. It was like an awakening. We looked at the patients differently then."

As workers were educated to teach the clients how to become more self-sufficient and as more rehabilitative and recreational programs were instated, many residents started to blossom, she said.

"It was good for the clients, it was good for morale, it was good for everybody," Ms. Allison said.

"Education, education, education," she said, became the hallmarks of the Staten Island Developmental Center, which succeeded Willowbrook.

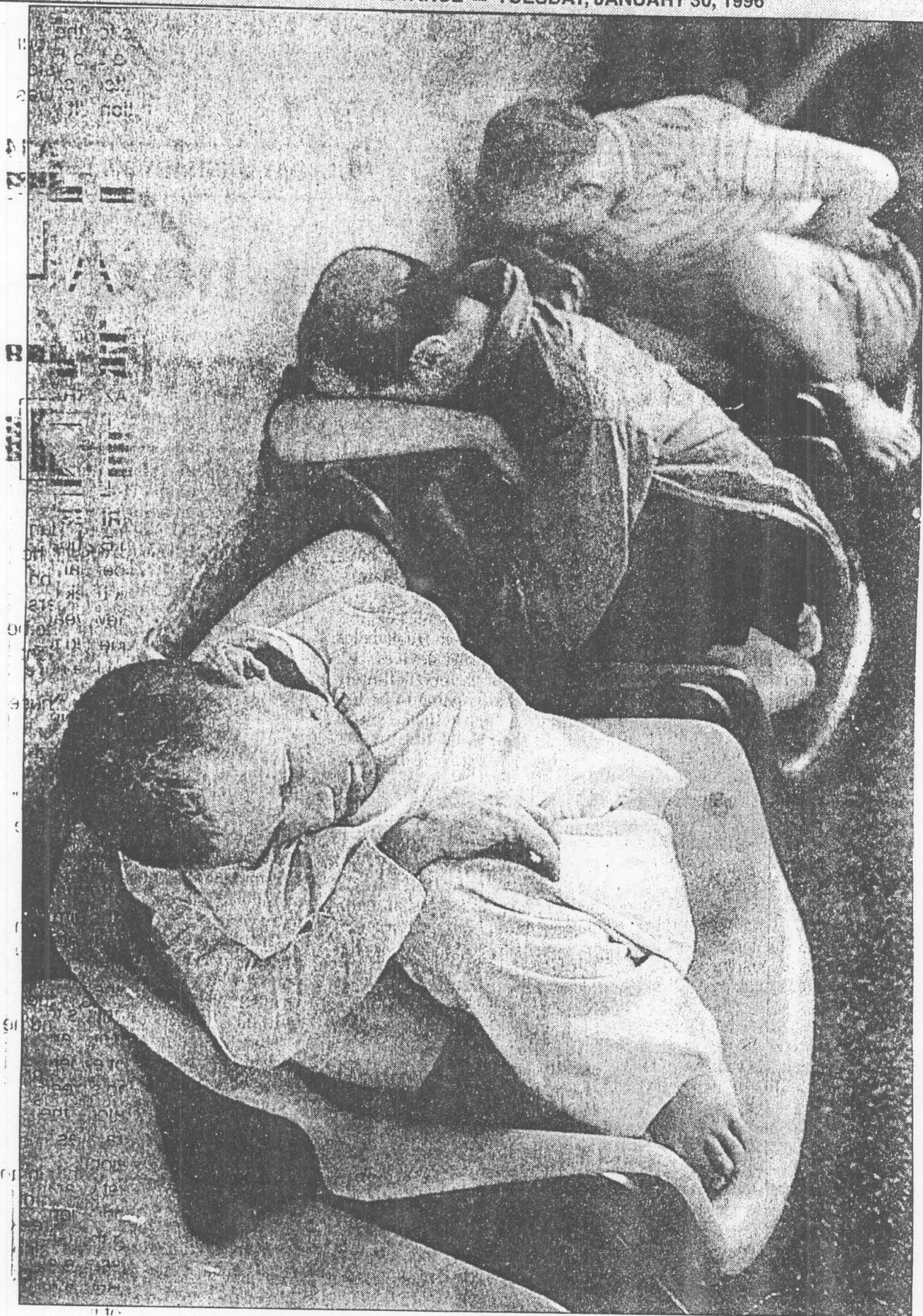
In 1987, when the developmental center closed, Ms. Allison

stayed on to work in the remaining small residences that house about 120 clients. Most former Willowbrook residents were relocated to community-based group homes. A number of former Willowbrook buildings went on to be refurbished and included on the College of Staten Island's Willowbrook campus that opened more than two years ago.

Working under Robert Witkowsky, director of the Staten Island Developmental Disabilities Services Office, Ms. Allison said, was a pleasure. He's efficient and professional but never stuffy, she said.

Ms. Allison worked in a supervisory capacity for most of her tenure, but always had direct contact with residents. She worked every shift and with a variety of residents, retiring as a developmental assistant.

"I've enjoyed working out there," she said. "I really loved my job. There've been some sad times; there've been some hard times, but something would always come through. A patient might look at you once in three years and give you the most marvelous smile — that would make it all worthwhile."



This 1972 photograph shows profoundly retarded patients curled up on chairs at Willowbrook State School. FILE PHOTOS

## Willowbrook's complex past

**1938:** The State Legislature appropriates \$5.1 million to purchase land in Willowbrook Park and construct a hospital to relieve the overcrowding of mentally retarded residents in the Letchworth Village facility in upstate Rockland County.

**1942:** Willowbrook is ready to open but is leased to the federal government for use during World War II. The Army adds buildings and opens Haloran General Hospital, which would serve 2,500 patients a day.

**1951:** After serving as a veterans' hospital, the Willowbrook State School finally opens. Within a year, 2,450 mentally retarded children reside there.

**1962:** Willowbrook's census peaks at 6,200, approaching twice the planned capacity of 3,500.

**1965:** In August, the Advance runs a series titled "What's Wrong with Willowbrook." A month later, Sen. Robert F. Kennedy tours the facility during a surprise inspection and describes the institution as bordering on a "snake pit."

**1971:** In a chilling series, 21-year-old Advance reporter Jane Kurtin exposes the hideous conditions under which thousands of retarded children are living. Within two months, TV reporter Gerald Rivera brings the story to the nation.

**1972:** The New York Civil Liberties Union brings a class-action lawsuit against the state on behalf of 5,300 Willowbrook residents.

**1975:** The suit results in a federal court agreement known as the Willowbrook Consent Decree, which laid the groundwork for statewide reform in the care, education and housing of people with developmental disabilities.

**1987:** Willowbrook, which had become the Staten Island Developmental Center, closes. Most former residents were relocated to community-based group homes, with about 120 clients remaining on the campus in small residences known as the Richmond Complex.

**1993:** The final settlement of the Willowbrook Consent Decree is signed in Brooklyn federal court, providing for the continued monitoring of all reforms spurred by the landmark judgment.