



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."