

25 years later, Willowbrook's ghosts still haunt him

■ Reporter who covered scandal on TV visits the new CSI campus today, but can't forget the terrible memories of what he saw in 1972

By GERALDO RIVERA

Each of us has a dark place in our heads where we keep unpleasant memories tucked away. Whether it be the loss of a loved one, or some devastating personal defeat, the shadow memory stays waiting for the opportunity to rush out of its psychic prison to bring pain and remembrance.

In the talk-show business, I've spent the last 10 years taking people back to their personal nightmare: The crime they endured; the betrayal or abandonment, and then listening as they talk about what ails them.

brook for a 25th anniversary retrospective of the story that would become arguably the most important ever uncovered by a local TV news operation.

I began the journey now as I did back then, at Building No. 6. The old number is still barely readable on the side of the big, solid, red brick building that once held two wards jammed full with severely and profoundly retarded children.

That is, thankfully, where the similarity between Willowbrook then and now ends. In the grim old days before the expose, each of the building's two wards were home to 60 or 70 young people. There was one attendant per ward.

The kids themselves were left essentially unattended. Most were naked and smeared with their filth, and were rocking rhythmically back and forth. The place smelled of filth, disease and death. And the sound those kids made is the soundtrack of my personal nightmare. It was an undulating moan. A melancholy wail that echoed off the bare concrete walls, and tore directly into your soul, I can hear it still. I close my eyes, and the tears come, and I hear that terrible sound vibrating in my bones.

Earleir this month, I visited my own living nightmare. It is a lovely place on Staten Island that I first saw almost exactly 25 years ago. It is a collection of stately buildings and well-manicured grounds with a lyrical sounding name to match: Willowbrook.

On Jan. 6, 1972, I was a young street reporter working for WABC's "Eyewitness News."

I got a call early that day from another idealistic young man, a doctor named Michael Wilkins. Mike told me that he had just resigned from the staff of the big state facility for the mentally retarded on Staten Island, at the time the largest such facility in the country.

The doctor told me that I would not believe the appalling conditions at the facility. He said the children there were being treated like animals. Having worked with Mike on several other stories, I trusted his judgment, although I thought he was exaggerating. Nothing in New York City could be that primitive and unspeakable.

I was wrong. Although I had already reported 800 street stories for Channel 7, and had already seen people dead from fire, riot and gunfire, I was not prepared for Willowbrook's institutionalized horror.

That Monday last week, I retraced that journey through the living and breathing hell of Willow-

You should see Willowbrook today. It is the campus of the CUNY's Staten Island University. Those fabulous grounds and sturdy buildings have been converted into a place of learning and enlightenment. Those residents of the old Willowbrook who survived its horrors have, by and large, gone on to far smaller and more humane facilities located in the community.

In the 25 years since the exposes began, the care and treatment afforded the developmentally disabled has profoundly improved. They are no longer being warehoused in kennels. Their living conditions these days are as close to normal as possible because the retarded are more like the rest of us than they are different from us. They have likes and dislikes, they have ambition, they like to be happy, and they want to be all they can be.

Now, most are getting the opportunity. Although, obviously, things are not perfect, they are far better than they were on the frigid day in January a quarter century ago. Thinking of all that has gone right for the retarded is the only way to quiet that mournful sound that scores the nightmare I will never shake.

[The writer, a former WABC-TV news reporter, has been a talk-show host and author.]

Faded note: 12/20/96 to D. Quinn-Bussard