

Willowbrook State School Attempts to Offer Hope and Understanding to Mental Patients

By ERWIN ENDRESS

Not so many years ago, the mongoloid, the unthinking one, was an outcast. He was pushed about, ridiculed, even stoned in the streets. He was sold into servitude and lived out his days in abject slavery. Today, he and his kind are patients in the Willowbrook State School, a facility for the mentally retarded, operated by the New York State Department of Mental Hygiene.

Yet, ignorance, suspicion and doubt still cast a dark shadow over the work being done with the stunted lives of the feeble of mind. According to Dr. Harold H. Berman, noted psychiatrist who is now director of the Willowbrook facility, there was a time when the mongoloid and others of stunted minds had commercial value. They were sold to the highest bidder and were trained to do simple work, without pay and at the complete discretion of sometimes entirely ignorant and sympathetic persons.

Today, they come to such a place as the Willowbrook school. There, men, women and children are protected from a world that is without understanding. In most cases, of their condition.

Eager for Praise

Yet, one out of every thousand persons is said to have a mental affliction. One in five families in the United States has a member in a mental institution. Approximately one per cent of the 140,000,000 persons in this country is a mental patient.

Behind the eight-foot high wire fence which separates Willowbrook from the world, you walk in an oasis for the feeble of mind. Behind locked doors, out of sight of the everyday world, is a vacuum to be filled with human understanding.

Here are adult patients, men and women. The Department of Mental Hygiene no longer hides this fact. Here is the small-minded man who polishes a fixture, and whose face lights up at your word of praise.

Here is the woman who has known no other life than the institutional life. Her joy is in simple accomplishment. She watches children...

they will go into small mental "colonies" within communities where, under guidance of a matron, they will live simple lives, doing simple work for recompense.

Some, one day, will find a place of understanding and affection in the outside world. For most, for the mongoloid, the macrocephalic and the microcephalic, there will never be a knowledge of the world outside.

"For all," says Dr. Berman, "there is a level of adjustment. This depends largely on the understanding an environment has for the individual. We seek to bring about this level of adjustment, and that is the purpose of this school."

There is much to be done at Willowbrook. Special training courses for children are contemplated. By the autumn of this year, officials will have in operation a simple school for the teaching of general subjects under guidance of psychiatrists.

Six buildings are already in operation at the tract, and the facility is being constantly improved and enlarged. Up to 1,200 patients may be there before the year is out.

Controversy Continues

There is still much controversy about this place. Mental institutions carry a stigma, often a criminal stigma, according to Dr. Berman.

Nothing could be further from the truth than that the mongoloid or the mentally retarded are potentially criminals, says this noted psychiatrist.

Outside, they are more sinned against than sinners, he says.

"Occasionally, some mentally-retarded person is involved in a crime," he says, "and immediately the stigma is nourished. What is overlooked is that terrible crimes are done daily by persons of so-called normal tendencies."

What are the qualities needed for an understanding of the mentally retarded? Realism, open-mindedness, kindness, gentleness, but not pity or gushing sympathy, say those who deal with such patients.

It is a matter to be weighed on the scales of civic conscience, say those who care for mental patients.



Mentally retarded children have healthy appetites as they form a chowline at mealtime in the Willowbrook State School. The children are orderly, obey simple directions from food servers and attendants

ities, they share in affection, their most gnawing need. For some, there is real hope, unskilled trades. One day, perhaps, they will eventually grasp a capacity for