

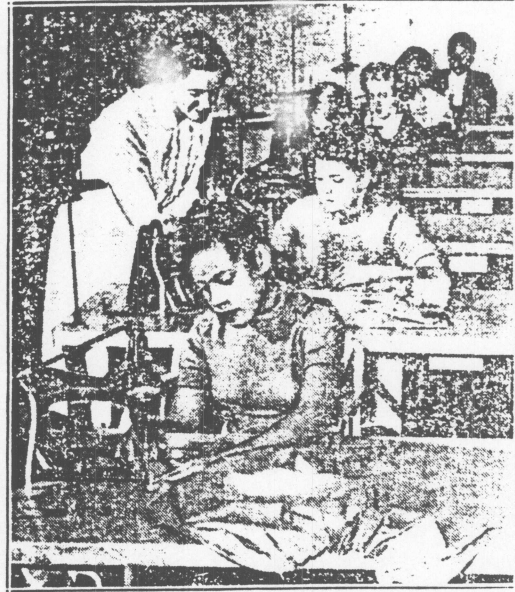
Miracle of the "Secret Children"



A well-equipped kitchen aids girls who study social science. These girls may later get jobs outside school as domestics.



School Director Dr. Harold H. Berman has revolutionized treatment of retarded children.



Girls are taught sewing by hand and machine. Some of them develop high skills and get outside employment under supervision.

Living Dead Find Life At S. I. School

(First of two articles on a sensationally successful new care center for mentally retarded children.)

By DICK OWEN

EVERY DAY at least 20 mentally deficient children are born in New York. For years they were known as "secret children." They were hidden away after birth in their parents' homes or institutions. But they need be secret no longer.

Only a few years ago these children were as good as dead. They couldn't walk, talk, recognize their surroundings, hear or think. Today they have a chance, thanks to the miracles being wrought at Willowbrook State School on Staten Island.

There are 4,000 children there, including 1,000 infants in cribs, and the figure is rising. Soon it will reach the 6,000 mark—6,000 retarded youngsters, once destined to hopelessness, who now have their own existence and live happily together in a community of their own.

Dr. Harold H. Berman, noted neuro-psychiatrist who directs the school, says the increase in numbers doesn't mean that these children are being born in greater proportion; it is due to the increase in New York's population and the increased facilities provided by New York State. Also, more and more parents are taking advantage of these facilities.

Before Willowbrook opened in 1947, nobody seems to know where these children were kept, hence the name "secret children." Once the fame of Willowbrook began to spread, the parents brought the children by the hundreds—primarily because of Berman's revolutionary dictum: "No case of a mentally retarded child is hopeless."

RESULT OF HOME CARE WAS USUALLY TRAGIC

Before Willowbrook there was little parents could do to take care of the afflicted children. Private institutions were costly, so the average family tried to supervise the retarded child in privacy at home. The results were generally tragic, giving the one child special care means neglecting other children in the family. Mothers and fathers, listening to go on about neurologic cures, took the child from doctor to doctor, clinic to clinic. They begged, borrowed, went in debt, outstayed their hours, did anything in their quest for relief.

There wasn't any. They realized the child had to

be kept in seclusion. Neighbors ostracized these children by refusing to let their own kids play with them. Other children made fun of the retarded child. Thoughtless persons wrote threatening letters to the distressed parents or annoyed them over the telephone about their "idiot" child.

The end of it all meant the child would become isolated in some room indoors, either lying forever in bed, or sitting in a stupor. It knew nothing, learned nothing, became nothing.

At Willowbrook these children are taught to walk, to talk. They go to school, learn simple trades, learn to enjoy movies, dancing, swimming. Above all, they live happily together in their own world.

PARENTS FIND SCHOOL OFFERS REHABILITATION

Day after day, more parents come to the school. They've heard of the wonders being done there—not cures, for there are none, but rehabilitation.

Oldtimers believed it was a waste of time to try to teach retarded children anything. Even if they were taught to walk or dress or feed themselves, it was argued, they quickly forgot everything and regressed to immobility.

Berman and his staff have blasted that misconception. Not only has he got the children out of bed and away from their only world, the ceiling, but he has them playing together, working together and even has a 40-piece band, all of its members once regarded as hopelessly retarded.

One of the greatest miracles at Willowbrook is the fact that for the first time in New York State, mentally retarded children who are also blind and deaf are being rehabilitated. The program began only last fall but already many of

these children talk, move around without supervision and play simple percussion instruments. And children who can see and move about freely "adopt" these others and make them their own special care.

RETARDED CHILDREN DIVIDED IN 3 GROUPS

Just what is a retarded child? It is an infant whose brain suffers varying degrees of damage while it is being carried by its mother. Such children are loosely divided into three grades: severely retarded (once known as idiots), moderately retarded and mildly retarded.

Severely retarded children are practically unaware of their own or any other existence. Some of them are badly crippled. Their five senses may be intact, but they have not learned to use any or all of them.

They grow into adults, but must be treated as infants still. This means they must be dressed and undressed, fed and bathed by attendants. They rarely talk and respond only to the simplest stimuli. They require supervised care for life.

CLASSES, ACTIVITIES PROVIDED BY SCHOOL

Dr. Berman, however, refuses to regard any case as hopeless. "You never know," he says, "when some glimmering of intelligence may be shown. One such child who had not shown any consciousness of his surroundings was one day startled into a mild display of intelligent interest in another child who was beating a toy drum. We have been able to bring that child along quite a bit."

Dealing with the moderately retarded child finds the school program aptly geared. Psychiatrists

keep close pace with every move at the school. The staff assigns the children to different activities and puts them into academic classes whenever possible.

The mildly retarded children get more classroom training and are taught simple tasks such as helping to prepare bread and cakes in the school's bakery, learning to mend shoes, helping in the carpenter's shop or doing gardening.

In the classrooms, teachers direct the children and become specialists in their field. Speech and spelling are taught by illustrations and phonetics. Classes are short and the children love them. In fact, it is a severe punishment to these children to be denied access to the schoolroom.

One of the major problems in connection with defective children is the crippling that so often accompanies the damage to brain tissues. This means that many of the youngsters in addition to being mentally retarded are spastics, sufferers from cerebral palsy, epilepsy, deafness and blindness.

The school has a battery of specialists to fight these handicaps. Crooked limbs are straightened by exercise or surgery. Operations correct defective vision. A complete dental surgery with skilled oral surgeons and mechanics rebuilds broken down teeth and jaw damage.

The spastics make amazing

progress with such pastimes as rug-making and water color painting.

When weather is fine the children are taken to playgrounds. They love swings and see-saws. Right now the school is trying to raise funds for a small carousel.

UP-TO-DATE HOSPITAL OFFERS TOP TREATMENT

In summer, hundreds of the children are taught to swim in the outdoor pool. There is also a gymnasium to strengthen bodies.

Florence Goodfield, chief supervising nurse at Willowbrook, has a 100-bed hospital for her charges. It is as modern as any hospital in the world and is served by prominent doctors and surgeons of the school as well as by visiting specialists.

Regarding behavior patterns, Miss Goodfield said there are few disciplinary problems. Some of the children are bad. They are not delinquents. No physical punishment is allowed, nor is any yelling at the children permitted. A child may be confined to a room for a few days if he is disobedient. This seclusion generally finds them contrite and eager to return to their classrooms and playmates.

Teen-age girls present special problems. Contrary to some opinions, these girls (and boys) are not oversexed. They are completely innocent children incapable of understanding the physical changes that occur in their bodies at puberty or adolescence. The reason the girls get into trouble in the outside world is because they are easily exploited. Training at Willowbrook teaches them self-respect and decency.

MOST GIRLS BECOME GOOD HOUSEKEEPERS

Most of these girls become expert housekeepers. They can cook, sew and keep a house spotless. But they have to be supervised. If they are released to private employment, someone has to manage their finances, for they are utterly naive about business matters.

Willowbrook has a number of older patients. Women and men are brought to the school after their guardians or parents die and there is no one left to care for them. Men and women in this group may be as old as 60, but their interests are juvenile—some of the women still play with dolls—but all act like happy children.

Tomorrow: How the school works on the minds and bodies of the formerly hopeless type of child.



Boys concentrate on their job of re-sooling shoes. The school also teaches them simple carpentry and upholstering furniture.