

Island Attitude Changes Willowbrook from 'School of Heartbreaks'

By ERWIN ENDRESS

Staten Island's "School of Heartbreaks" is no more. It has passed into oblivion, along with other false notions about facilities for the mentally retarded.

So say officials of Willowbrook State School, the borough's Department of Mental Hygiene facility as it approaches \$7,000,000 worth of growth and expansion to take its place among the Island's "major industries."

A controversial and much-despised project in its early pre-war construction days, Willowbrook believes it is an "appreciated and welcome facility as it approaches new growth."

Gone, officials say, is a notion that a facility such as Willowbrook could bring only discredit to its home community.

AND GOING FAST, they add, are stigmas which many formerly attached to the accident of mental retardation.

The most significant evidence of what mental hygiene officials feel is a "new community attitude toward the ever-children," is the arrival of the volunteer worker on the Willowbrook scene, and the growing interest shown by community organizations.

As one official put it:

"Staten Island takes its place among the most enlightened communities in the

nation in its attitude toward the mentally retarded."

While officials admit that there are some who question the value of Willowbrook in the community, it has been years since any unified effort in opposition to its growth has been evident.

THE OUTGROWTH of community interest, they say, has been the expansion of the school's recreation and educational programs. It has developed concurrently with the number of individuals and groups which have offered "time effort and understanding" to Willowbrook.

Dr. Harold H. Berman, the school's director, says that, along with interest shown by the community, has come a kind of "family effort enthusiasm" among the staff workers.

When the school's band, which plays with donated instruments, was without uniforms, staff members at Willowbrook staged an original musical production to raise cash.

VETERANS organizations, church groups, service clubs, and social and civic units have sponsored scores of parties and entertainment programs for Willowbrook's kids. The most active group, the Benevolent Society of Retarded Children, conducts a year-round program.

Individual volunteers — Islanders who are interested in

the work of the school—are at work in the occupational therapy department and the rehabilitation clinic. The flag which flies over Willowbrook was donated by a service club.

Members of some Island groups arrive regularly to take kids on trips to points of interest within the city. Others accompany the kids to sports in season.

Indicative of the school's expanding community program is what officials consider the most significant development in recent years: A foster parent program.

It is Willowbrook's newest community service innovation, and one that is likely to attract

attention throughout mental hygiene circles, officials say.

THE KEY GROUP presently at work in this field is the Evening Guild of the Oakwood Heights Community Church whose members, four times a month, act as "foster mothers" to children who have no parents or who are seldom visited.

Here's what one official has to say about the program:

"This activity is one of the many links which the child has with community life. It fills a void in the lives of these otherwise parent-less children. As these foster parents adopt the children, so do

the children adopt the foster parents and look forward to their visiting days with happy anticipation of the security of a confidential friend."

The foster mothers take the kids on trips, visit points of interest on the school grounds, participate in game and storytelling sessions and take a personal interest in students' progress.

CONSTRUCTION of Willowbrook's six new buildings will increase the school's housing capacity by about one-third, and will add more than 1,000 to the student roster.

Willowbrook's projected pay-

roll of \$3,683,722 for the 1955-56 fiscal year makes the facility one of the borough's largest paymasters. More than 1,000 persons, most of them Islanders, already are employed at Willowbrook, and several hundreds more will be hired once the expansion program is completed, officials say.

The school's officials add that present growth in community interest indicates continued growth to meet the larger needs of the growing school.

While it still is true that the accident of mental retardation hits hard when it hits home, there are many, they say, who are giving the lie to Willow-

brook's misnomer: School of Heartbreaks.

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Mrs. Westberg Nominated For State School Post

(Advance Albany Bureau)

ALBANY — Mrs. Edna Newbranch Westberg of 15 Manee avenue, Princes Bay, was nominated today by Governor Harriman to the board of visitors of the Willowbrook State School.

Mrs. Westberg replaces J. Joyce Klinger of Stapleton, whose term expired Dec. 31. The appointment is subject to confirmation by the state Senate.