

Retarded Tots Find New Life In Brass Band

By DICK OWEN

A dramatic experiment with retarded children is being carried out successfully at Willowbrook State School on Staten Island. There, 40 children, who a few years ago were practically unaware of their own or anyone else's existence, have been formed into a brass band that is rapidly becoming one of the island's most popular musical groups.

Willowbrook is host to some 4,300 children, all of them retarded, some severely, others less so. Dr. Harold H. Berman, head of the institution, in a revolutionary move to bring some light into the lives of many of these youngsters, hit upon the idea of having a band. He told his musical director, Vincent Lombardi, to give him the works, not just a fife and drum corps, but trumpets, horns, clarinets, drums, everything.

Brother Helps

Lombardi, a competent trumpet player and a teacher who can play every band instrument, enlisted the aid of his brother, Joe, who is also a teacher of music.

The going at first was rough, very rough. The children selected were from 8 to 14 years old. Some of them were withdrawn from life, that is, they would sit alone in corners and just rock.

In addition, the kids couldn't read. Yet from these children, the Lombardis have managed to produce a band.

Patience and Love

Lombardi accomplished this near miracle by patience, love, and by working out a unique system of musical notation. For example, he had the children identify the notes of the scale (C, D, E, F, G, A, B) by connecting them together in a story.

It wasn't long before the children forgot the story and learned to identify the notes by their proper names. As they are unable to absorb much schooling, the youngsters have concentrated their efforts on learning music. The effects are unbelievable.

Has Amazing Skill

A saxophone player, who was completely isolated from the world, has grown into a charming teenager. He plays with amazing skill and can identify any chord that is played on a piano without seeing the keyboard.

A marimba player needs no music but can follow the band into any key and keep perfect time and pitch. A boy who is a partial spastic with severely deformed hands, by sitting sideways at a

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piano accompanies the band perfectly. And the whole group is led by a little orphan of 8, who hasn't a relative in the world.

Willowbrook attendants, realizing that state funds cannot be spared to provide musical instruments and uniforms for the kids, put on an amateur show and from the proceeds bought the youngsters their blue and gold uniforms.

The Benevolent Society for Retarded Children, comprised of relatives and friends of Willowbrook children, work all year round raising money for all the children. They donated funds to buy instruments.

Dr. Berman is proud of his band but, as he points out, they do need some new instruments and always welcome either the gift of an instrument or a cash donation.

A Beautiful Experience

As for the children, the band is their life. Many of these youngsters will never leave Willowbrook. For them music is a beautiful experience that never ends. But others, aided by music, have made adjustments and are now back in their homes.

It is quite possible that nowhere in America has any band composed of retarded children gained such wide and rapid recognition as the Willowbrook State School Band.



rehearsal, Joe Lombardi (left) and his brother, Vincent, go from boy to boy aiding him to play difficult passages in the music. These retarded children at Willowbrook State School on Staten Island, play anything from solos, overtures to military marches.