

'SECRET CHILDREN'

Lack of Facilities Problem in Caring For the Retarded



(NEWS foto by George Mattson)

Four-year-old patient at Willowbrook School for Retarded Children wears special "mittens" to prevent her from self-injury.

By JACK MALLON

(Second of two articles)

I AM telling this story because I don't want what happened to my Herbie to happen to another mother's son."

With these words, Mrs. Mary Harber, 68-year-old widow, began the tragic story of her son's death in the locked wards of the Willowbrook School for Retarded Children in Staten Island.

"I cared for my boy night and day for 40 years," she said.

For the last 32 years the Harbers have lived in a five-room

**DAILY NEWS
SPECIAL FEATURE**

apartment in the Flatbush section of Brooklyn.

"When we moved here there were plenty of trees and space for Herbie. I would take him for walks daily," she said.

"I had our apartment set up so he could move around by himself. He couldn't walk too well, but he could get around.

"Herbie was a happy boy. Even though he couldn't talk, he had a sense of humor and was always laughing.

"Last year I began to worry about him. What would happen after I'm gone? My husband had been dead for 13 years.

"I decided that it would be best for him to adjust to institutional life while I was alive. If they put him into some hospital after my death he wouldn't be able to survive.

**IN THIRTEEN MONTHS
HE NEVER SMILED**

"So I reluctantly put him in Willowbrook last year. In the 13 months he spent there I never saw him laugh or smile. No matter what I said he just looked at me with a sad expression.

"I went to visit him every Sunday and Wednesday. I lived just for Sundays and Wednesdays. I would get up around 6 A.M. It took me over two hours on five buses to get there.

"The first five months he spent in the infirmary and lost 50 pounds. I guess he wouldn't eat and no one would take the time to feed him.

"So then they transferred him to the hospital. He was like a skeleton. His legs had become so thin he couldn't walk.



(NEWS foto by Frank Russo)

Mrs. Shirley Epstein presides over meeting of Benevolent Society, an organization composed of parents of patients at Willowbrook which is demanding more help now for the retarded.

gram. Herbie had been burned again.

"I rushed to the hospital, arriving there at 7 P.M. The doctors were working over Herbie. He was unconscious and he was ice cold. 'Why is he so cold?' I asked.

"At 3 A.M. my boy died.

**TAKEN INTO SHOWER
BY ANOTHER PATIENT**

"I learned from the director that Herbie had been taken into the shower room by another retarded child. He was pushed under the shower while seated in his wheelchair.

"The faucet was turned on and scalding water came out. I think the other retarded boy got scared and ran away. The water kept running. And Herbie couldn't walk. He couldn't get out of the shower. So he was burned to death.

"Why do they let other retarded children do this work without adequate supervision?" she sobbed.

"I just don't want another mother to go through this . . . Six months earlier there was another unpublicized death of a retarded boy at Willowbrook. "Death by strangulation" was the verdict of the medical examiner.

An unruly 20-year-old patient, with a history of assaults was put into a ward of low-functioning children as punishment. The ward, according to the director

of the institution, "was 100% overcrowded."

During the night while the two attendants were absent from the first floor ward of Building 2, where 89 youngsters were sleeping, the delinquent boy grabbed the handicapped 15-year-old victim and strangled him to death.

"We can't be quiet any longer" said Mrs. Shirley Epstein, president of the Benevolent Society, an organization composed of 800 parents of the children of Willowbrook. The group meets regularly to discuss common problems. "We demand more help, now," she said.

At a recent meeting of the officers of the Benevolent Society, alarm was expressed over the inability of the Department of Mental Hygiene to cope with the expanding problem of retardation.

"When my daughter became retarded after an attack of measles and encephalitis, I went to examine an upstate school where we were planning to place her," a father said.

"I walked into one of the cottages unannounced and what I saw was horrible. I freed concentration camp prisoners after the war and these children looked worse."

**A WOMAN TELLS
HOW THEY'RE FED**

Another parent observed: "When I say that the children are starving I'm not exaggerating. We see it with our own eyes.

"A woman told me she witnessed the feeding of the infants in one of these institutions. They are given a bottle and then them into a line of cribs. If the baby takes the bottle, fine. If he doesn't, he doesn't eat.

"A little later the attendant rolls around a cart like in a supermarket and picks up the bottles."

Still another parent said: "Sometimes when the children are taken home for a week or two they actually go through withdrawals. They shake like leaves. They pump the kids full of tranquilizers and other drugs in the school so they won't have to take care of them."

Similar complaints are being made by members of the Community League, an organization of 200 parents of the retarded at Wassaic in Dutchess County. Children from New York are sent to Willowbrook, Wassaic or Letchworth Village.

"They are sending delinquent and emotionally disturbed children to Wassaic from the New York courts," Mrs. Dorothy Fixler, president of the league, revealed. "Girls not more than 14 or 15 years of age are kept with women from 60 to 80. Some of the innocent young girls pick up the gutter language of the delinquent and pregnant girls that the courts send up," she said.

Some 10 years ago this institu-

tion was rocked with charges of brutalities being committed by a hard-core group of delinquent children who had been placed with the harmless retarded ones.

At that time the late State Mental Hygiene Commissioner Paul Hoch said that the basic problem was the state's shortage of facilities for mental defectives who are also delinquents.

"They are now mixed in with the others, where they do not belong. Some steps will have to be taken to build separate buildings for them or to place them in specialized institutions," he said.

**GROUND BREAKING?
NONE IN SIGHT**

As an aftermath of the scandal, Gov. Harriman in 1956 proposed the construction of a closed state institution for 600 mentally retarded delinquents and semi-delinquent patients.

Ground-breaking ceremonies have not yet been scheduled for this special institution.

Meanwhile, parents are being encouraged to keep their retarded children at home with the step up of programs at daytime clinics throughout the city.

From a six-story building on Manhattan's East Side, the Kennedy Child Study Center is conducting a pilot project to "show that most retarded children can remain in the community when adequate services are available for both the child and his family."

"The great majority of the mentally retarded don't need institutionalization. They should live with their families. They can be helped in the community," Sister Anita, program director for the center, said.

In 1958 the center named in memory of Lt. Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr., was established at 151 E. 67th St. It is a nonsectarian agency serving slowly developing children from 4 to 8 years of age.

**THE COST IS BASED
ON PARENTS' MEANS**

The center provides evaluation clinics, daytime developmental programs, training programs and research. Parents pay according to their means.

For every ten children there is a teacher and assistant. There presently is a total of 80 children in the daytime training program.

Other major clinics serving the retarded in New York City include the Shield of David and Einstein Clinics in the Bronx, the Solomon Clinic in Brooklyn and the clinics at Flower-Fifth Ave., New York Medical College and St. Vincent's Hospital in Manhattan.

With this trend toward community daytime programs for the retarded and the five-year plan for construction of the new institutions there is at last a little ray of hope for the anguished parents of the "secret children."



(NEWS foto by Evelyn Straus)

A ray of hope for mentally-retarded children is Kennedy Child Study Center in Manhattan, one of several daytime clinics. Here, "trainable" children are being taught how to tell time.