

# A Woman Recalls the Death Of Her Son at Willowbrook

By TIMOTHY LEE

The young man named Thomas spent 5 years at the Willowbrook State School for the Mentally Retarded before he was killed by a fellow patient last July in the 26th year of his life.

Six months ago he was transferred to Ward C, which is one of those visited by Sen. Robert Kennedy last week, where naked men sit, befouled, dazed in their private night.

"He was transferred there because the other patients were always beating him up and he wouldn't defend himself," his mother says. "The attendants were good to him but there just weren't enough of them to keep

the others from beating him up."

Dr. Jack Hammond, director of the school, says it is difficult to get male attendants to work in the ward described by Sen. Kennedy as "filthy."

Each time she visited Thomas during his stay in Ward C, his mother says, he found him cut and bruised. Because he communicated so poorly he was never able to tell her who beat him.

"The attendants told me the others picked on him because he was so big [6-foot-4]," she says. "The beatings didn't stop when he was transferred and he didn't belong in Ward C anyway. He was able to bathe and dress himself and go to the toilet. Now I feel I was lax in not doing something about it when he was beaten up all the time."

Because of the conditions, and in some cases the treatment, some parents with the means to do so have withdrawn their children from state institutions and placed them with private agencies.

One Brooklyn mother took her 14-year-old daughter out of the Letchworth Village school near Haverstraw and took a job to pay the \$315 monthly fee at a private institution in Connecticut.

Another Brooklyn woman took her 22-year-old son out of Willowbrook after eight years because he was punished for walking the grounds without permission. Like Thomas, he was able to bathe and dress himself and use the toilet, but his punishment, she says, was removal of his clothes and at least one day spent in Ward C.

He now attends a day center at the Assn. for the Help of Retarded Children, a private organization operated with matching funds from private contributions and federal and state grants.

"He learned more in a month at the AHRC than he learned in eight years at Willowbrook," the mother says.