

Willowbrook Revisited: Five Years Later

On March 7, 1966, 22 retired Staten Islanders arrived by chartered bus at Willowbrook State School to begin work as volunteers. They were the first SERVE (Serve and Enrich Retirement by Volunteer Experience) volunteers. Today, there are 564 current active SERVE volunteers, working at 24 agencies throughout Staten Island. The largest group - 208 - serves at Willowbrook State School.

What makes these older persons, most of whom are in their 70's, so eager to volunteer week after week, year after year, at Willowbrook? What kinds of jobs do these volunteers do? What has made this growth possible?

Some volunteers give direct one-to-one services; others provide equally needed indirect service. Those giving indirect service have developed a personal relationship with the residents over the years. These volunteers work side by side with them in the sewing room, the O.T. shops, the warehouse, and the supply room; they get to know and understand them, and develop friendships that are meaningful to both. As one volunteer has said, "Stamping clothing in building 61 has been something I look forward to. It is a comfortable feeling when I approach the building to find the patients actually looking for me." Another has added, "I think SERVE is a very good way to say 'I am helping the best way I can to make another person a little happier, even if it is only sewing on a few buttons or mending some clothes'".

Of the initial 22 volunteers, only one volunteered to work directly with an individual patient, but now there are many who give this type of service in the baby buildings. "I

volunteered for the children," a SERVE volunteer reminisced. "This was not easy, but I did not want to be a quitter. Now I go twice a week there and the love of these patients is very rewarding."

Some of the assignments listed below resulted from suggestions made by volunteers as they saw the needs once they were already at Willowbrook. Specialized job assignments have been developed by staff as new volunteers have come into the program, using the skills and talents that are based on their lifetime experiences.

The involvement of already established groups with special skills is encouraged by SERVE, as evidenced by the Stapleton Senior Center folk dance group which goes to Willowbrook every Wednesday to teach dancing to groups of adolescents.

In the last two years the most important addition to the recruitment techniques has been the recruitment of others by satisfied volunteers. "Each one bring one" has become the theme. Scarcely a week passes without a new recruit joining the Willowbrook contingent. Volunteers are free to invite friends to join them where the bus picks up the group and this is encouraged. The SERVE staff person who meets the bus as it arrives for each working session welcomes the newcomer and brings him to the volunteer office, where together with the Willowbrook volunteer coordinator, they determine his proper placement. Frequently, the new volunteer has heard about the volunteer opportunities available and has some idea about where he would like to start. Orientation of the new placement is done by the staff person to whom he is

assigned and he starts on his job immediately. He is introduced and officially welcomed as a member of the SERVE group at the weekly meeting which takes place after lunch.

These weekly volunteer training meetings are the heart of the program. This is where the volunteers trade thoughts and opinions, make suggestions, ask questions, bring their complaints, and voice their compliments. Here is where they tell about the progress of the children they are caring for or working with, where they ask for new supplies, suggest possible new volunteer assignments, where medical and professional staff of the school discuss retardation and tell about new techniques used to enrich the lives of the residents. Both the Willowbrook volunteer coordinator and the SERVE staff are responsible for this on-going, in-service training program.

SERVE volunteers have provided Willowbrook with many dividends in addition to their thousands of hours of service. They are goodwill ambassadors to the community, interpreting the important services of the institution, relating the care and concern the staff provides for the residents. They are also effective recruiters, not only of new volunteers, but of needed materials, each year collecting and donating hundreds of pounds of used clothing, toys, costume jewelry, and assorted items for use in the occupational therapy shops.

They have stimulated other volunteer activities for the benefit of Willowbrook -- activities conducted by SERVE volunteer groups in churches and housing projects, and by senior centers under the auspices of the