

Elderly Blind Find Joy In Aiding Handicapped

A number of elderly blind men and women on Staten Island have volunteered to help the mentally handicapped in Willowbrook State School and elsewhere and have found that they are helping to cure their own loneliness and despondency.

The volunteers, whose ages range from 60 to 98, with an average age of 70, work under the aegis of SERVE—or "Serve and Enrich Retirement by Volunteer Experience," an organization financed by the Community Service Society of New York.

Twice a week, a SERVE bus picks them up at their homes to take them to the state school, a sprawling institution housing 5,600 residents of all ages, making it the largest such facility in the United States.

There they handle a variety of assignments — sewing, knitting, repairing furniture and making ceramic ashtrays, trivets and toys. Also, they take care of babies and children and, in some instances, even teach the retarded patients.

Joseph Cordona, one of the blind volunteers, who repairs chairs at Willowbrook, summed up the feelings of many of his colleagues when he said:

"You know, we're really no different from other people but for our handicap. When we help the mentally retarded, we do it out of a sense of wanting to help a fellow human being. And, in doing this, we also get a new vision of life.

"It is really a new dimension, both in utilizing blind volunteers as well as serving the mentally ill," said Mrs. Anne K. Reisch, SERVE coordinator for Staten Island.

"We are establishing that it is simply untrue that old blind people are incapable of any productive work," she said.

The SERVE program for the blind is only three months old, but there are already 13 volunteers who devote anywhere from five to 10 hours twice a week, oftener, sometimes, to helping patients at Willowbrook and at community service centers in other places on Staten Island.

One of the volunteers is Mrs. Anita Perez, 55, whose husband is also blind and who, she says, she is "persuading inasmuch as a wife can persuade" to accompany her to Willowbrook.

"I like to meet people," she said with a smile that seems to be one of her permanent attributes. "I'm sorry I couldn't do this years ago," she added.

Then, resuming her needlework, which had been interrupted a few moments earlier by a plea from a fellow blind volunteer who asked Mrs. Perez to help her sew on a dress button, Mrs. Perez continued:

"I find it better to work with sighted people than being just with other blind people. It's not normal to see only other blind people. Believe me, it's so very wonderful when you can do things for others."