

Readers tell us their opinions about Willowbrook

Here is a sampling of some of the mail the Advance has received since it began publishing articles on conditions at the Willowbrook State School:

She's grateful for stories

Thank you, thank you, thank you for those articles you are writing about conditions at Willowbrook State School.

While our tax dollars are going toward welfare for people capable of working but are too lazy, these poor unfortunate children are living like animals. Maybe your articles will open the public's eyes. Since your articles started I have been doing nothing but crying. I had a child who would have been 3 in January. I thank God she died this past February for she would have been part of this hell on earth.

MRS. N. SCHIAVONE,

132 Kelvin Ave.,
Bay Terrace

Attendants

perform well

We are social workers at Willowbrook State School and are well acquainted with living conditions in this institution. The ward attendants at Willowbrook and especially in Building 6 are dedicated and hard working. We know that many of them have formed deep affections for the children, buy them clothes, food and presents, out of their own salaries and even bring some children, who have no families, to their own homes on holidays.

We know that the real problems in Building 6 and in the rest of Willowbrook are caused by the lack of money. Even before the budget cuts in April 1971 there was not enough money provided by New York State to provide enough attendants and other staff, adequate living quarters and

meaningful training programs for any of the residents of Willowbrook, but especially for older, retarded persons in buildings such as six.

We know that the ward attendants in Building 6, and other buildings for youths and adults, desperately want to train the children but are not able to because there are too many residents in a ward, too few attendants and practically no training equipment or programs.

We also know that the parents of the children understand the nature of the problem. They know how difficult it is to care for and train one severely retarded child and how impossible it is for attendants to care for and train 60 retarded people in a ward.

Any progress which a child fortunate enough to be in a training program makes, is often lost when he is transferred to a building with practically no training programs. This is not the fault of ward attendants but the fault of those citizens and legislators who refuse to provide the money to run a state school properly.

It is, in fact, a miracle that ward attendants in Building 6 and throughout the institution have not become completely discouraged but keep trying to do an almost impossible job.

ELIZABETH LEE,

350 Willow Rd.W.,
Graniteville

IRA FISHER,

41 Coughlin Ave.,
West Brighton

Programs instituted

When I finished reading the articles, I was amazed. I have been an employe at Willowbrook State School for 11 years and have worked in several areas of the institution. In that time there have been many new programs instituted through the untiring efforts of the director.

If the author of the article had taken the time to tour all

of the areas at Willowbrook personally, she might have found some pleasant surprises. Sunday afternoon the newest unit to be opened at Willowbrook had open house for the parents and relatives of its residents. The education, occupational therapy, and speech teachers gave their own time to come in and speak with the visitors and explain their programs and their work with the children. This unit was described in the Advance several months ago, and it has grown in the past year due to the dedication of its employes and education department.

Let's be fair to the administration, patients and employes. See the whole picture before you condemn the reviews. Remember, too, if the parents were able to cope with their child at home, Willowbrook and other institutions would not have 5,200 patients. Yes, there is an overcrowding and there is understaffing due to the freeze and to the attrition of many employes. However, there are many dedicated employes there who the public never hears about. I am speaking of the ones who take patients home, launder their clothes and provide home-made birthday cakes and treats on their days off. Many children have been placed at Willowbrook who have never received a visit from a parent or relative, and the attendants try to compensate for this.

Yes, there is a shortage of laundry. Many of the children are destructive, and much is worn out and unable to be replaced due to budget cuts. No child at Willowbrook is starved as your article claimed. Our food supply is computed at Albany, and the amount sent down is calculated to provide a balanced diet. Many of our children are "food grabbers" and if allowed to do so, would consume an unhealthy amount of food. It is most unfair to place the blame on Willowbrook or any other institution for something they have no control over and that is decreed by Albany.

Anyone who has had the privilege of seeing the "children" of Willowbrook perform at their Christmas show or at the annual Benevolent Society's luncheon knows the good things that are accomplished here. Perhaps some of the community could be made aware by your articles of the good people and the hard work that is done here. I am sure if the senior citizens group or more properly called SERVE were asked, they could give a resume of how much help they give to Willowbrook and what they see. They, too, provide love and help to many children with their weekly visits.

I can't help wondering if the doctor mentioned has ever been to the "Congo" to make the assertion he did. If these diseases are foreign to the "civilized world", then what is the need for the tropical disease centers located as far away as New York City? Why is research being done to combat so many diseases prevalent today if as he claims they are not known in the civilized world?

MRS. PATRICIA LAMB, R.N.,
Willowbrook State School,
Staten Island

* * *

Knows facts

first-hand

It is about time that you have finally touched upon the very important subject of the conditions at Willowbrook State School. Since I worked there a few years ago, I know, first hand, how bad the conditions really are.

Maybe by bringing this to the attention of the people of Staten Island, there may be some people who will investigate what is truly going on and what can be done by them, and by County, City and State officials. While working at Willowbrook, I helped with the recreation in Building 20 along with Richie Bardsley also hired as summer help. Both of us working together, played baseball, took the patients to the

swimming pool, the gym, to the movies once and on a hospital ship in New York harbor for a day. They loved every minute of it and so did we.

The following summer, again we applied for the job because we both enjoyed working with the mentally retarded and we got to know each patient personally.

But our "wonderful" Governor Rockefeller cut state funds which we were cut also. So, we were out of a job and Building 20 was without the recreation they once had. Once in a while we visit Willowbrook and all the patients still remember us and they ask when we're going to play baseball outside again, take walks and go for a bus ride but all we can say is anything but the truth just to make them happy.

So if the people could know what is going on, then they would want to know what they can do to help because Staten Islanders are like that.

Maybe by some slight chance Congressman Murphy, Borough President Connor, Senator Marchi, Assemblyman Russo, Mayor Lindsay, or even Governor Rockefeller might investigate and find out what's happening and what they can do.

STEPHEN JAVARUSKI,
951 North Railroad Ave.,
New Dorp

* * *
**Dedicated
personnel**

This letter is not being written as a challenge to the facts of the stories but rather as a reminder that a true story is seldom told by "facts" alone. There is the old and true adage, "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder". This suggests as equally true that, "Grossness is in the eye of the beholder".

Your reporter presented a gross story of Willowbrook. She saw the facts as it was very likely suggested that she see them and, in fairness, as most outsiders would indeed see them. For there are "gross" facts to be observed at Willowbrook. The unkempt appearance, the misshapen bodies, the sores, the drooling, the soiling, the groveling and the animalistic cries and behavior are all there. But this does not mean that Willowbrook is a "gross" institution and that its employees should be shamed for being a

part of it. Though there may well be some unworthy members, it does not mean that the Willowbrook staff is peopled by incompetent, uncaring, barbaric, sadistic persons. And it does not mean that the residents of the school are regarded as anything less than human.

Quite to the contrary, Willowbrook State School should be viewed with an appreciative eye. Then the real story of the institution will unfold. This story must begin with the social concern that created a place where those exceptional persons whose families would not or could not care for them could find a home.

True, it's not "homelike" but their sheer number precludes this possibility. However, the basic care should be adequate to keep them comfortable and happy. Should be! But admittedly at present it is not. The level of care provided at Willowbrook is unfortunately directly related to the level of the concern of us who are society. Collectively as the "State" we created the institution to "care" for these "persons", but having got them out of sight we put them out of mind and tell our representatives in Albany to "spend only enough to keep them alive".

This is sinful! We should appreciate Willowbrook for what it does but we have to be concerned enough for the persons there to support it at the level that it can be appreciated. I am not a "protestor," but last Sunday I permitted myself to be photographed with other concerned people in a protest march at Willowbrook designed to influence our Governor and representatives in Albany to lift the freeze against hiring and spending so that we might have an adequate budget for staff and care.

Every concerned person and certainly every critical person ought to make an effort for improvement through his representative, for it can only come through legislation.

The next chapter of the true story of Willowbrook would be concerned with the residents. Seen with the proper eye, they are beautiful people. Not in the aesthetic sense for so often retardation is accompanied by some sort of physical anomaly, but they are beautiful in the genuineness of the personalities.

They are friendly, warm, emotional, affectionate, open and direct. They have no social veneer to hide behind as we do. They are happy too, when given a little love and attention. They are so desperately needful of love. This is what makes the present situation so doubly tragic. The shortage of help robs them not only of the satisfaction of actual physical needs but it robs them of the happiness that attention gives.

The final chapter of the Willowbrook story is the true perspective of its personnel. In all the levels of the operation, these are dedicated persons. They are living the concern that society "says" it has. They are the persons who seek to fill the void left by family separation. They are not "Keepers". They are the persons who share the lives of and share their lives with the "undesirables". They are the ones who touch the "untouchables". They are the persons who are reclaiming many social "rejects" to be discharged as productive citizens. They are the persons who give meaning to empty lives by teaching skills to fill empty hours. And so on and on . . . They are the persons whose hearts glow with the response of those to whom they minister but they are also the persons whose hearts bleed because there are so many who need so much more. These are the heroic persons who sacrifice from extra time and meager salaries to bring happiness and comfort to overwhelming need. They are the people who care!

And these are the people who are maligned because they do not do more!

Yes, there are faults at Willowbrook State School but let's not criticize. Let's be appreciative and supportive! Correction and improvement

will most certainly follow if there are the means.

ARNOLD E. OSTLUND,
Protestant Chaplain
Willowbrook State School

Advance,
November 22, 1971