



# Pete Hamill

## ON WILLOWBROOK

We have been watching them now for almost two weeks, rocking vacantly on benches, huddled in some private world on the urine-stinking floors of bathrooms, some of them with heads shaved in the style of Dachau, others squatting and dirty and unloved, while behind them a low moaning sound comes down the barren corridors.

These are the children of Willowbrook. But they are also our children, no matter what their age might be, and they come from all the streets of New York. We have sealed them away, hiding them behind the walls of an institution, banishing them to some 18th century scrap bin for people who are different. It is an obscenity.

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These children are dying from a lack of love. According to Dr. Michael Wilkins, who was fired for organizing the parents of Willowbrook children, every person admitted to the institution contracts hepatitis within six months of arrival. Those who contract diseases spread them easily because there are no facilities for isolation. From April 1, 1970 to March 31, 1971 there were 104 deaths at Willowbrook. During the eight month period from April 1st to Nov. 31, 1971—when the loss of staff was beginning to destroy any pretense of care—there were 97 deaths.

At present, from four to five children die every month from choking on food, because there are not enough attendants to help them eat, and because only four to six minutes are allocated for feeding each child. This is in 1972. This is in a time when we occasionally refer to ourselves as civilized.

The National Accreditation Council for Facilities for the Mentally Retarded

recommends a four-to-one patient-attendant ratio. At Willowbrook the ratio in the wards is between 20 and 30 to one. In November 1970, there were 3400 members of the Willowbrook staff. After the job freeze, and the campaign of attrition was begun, the staff was reduced to 2600. If Federal guidelines were strictly enforced (and the Federal government pays for about 60 per cent of the beds at Willowbrook), the staff would be 4200. At anytime, HEW can withdraw its support from Willowbrook, and the place would have to be closed.

Apparently nothing would have been done at all about this if Assemblyman Andrew Stein had not discovered the place. He was the first politician to raise hell about Willowbrook since Robert Kennedy's 1965 visit, and it brought the place to the attention of Geraldo Rivera, of ABC-TV News, who has done a moving series of reports from those desperate halls. The rest of the media followed up. The pictures of those stunned and damaged children apparently even moved the hearts of the Republicans. And Rockefeller has now come up with some money that will partially alleviate the situation.

In fact, the money was there all along, and is still inadequate. In New York, spending state money is a two-stage process. First there must be an appropriation, which in the present fiscal year, ending April 1st, came to \$600,000,000 for the Department of Mental Hygiene. The second stage is to obtain an expenditure authorization—that is, permission to spend the money. This amount does not have to be the entire authorized sum, and in the case of the Department of Mental Hygiene, under which Willowbrook

operates, Rockefeller only authorized the spending of \$580 million or \$20 million less than the authorized figure.

So Rockefeller simply allowed the spending of more of the originally authorized money. It can be spent at the original rate, which means that from now until the end of this fiscal year—April 1st—there will be \$5 million to spend. Starting April 1st, under Rockefeller's hold-the-line budget, the full \$20 million will be available for the whole year. But while this looks like a lot of money (and of course is a lot of money) it is still not enough because it will only allow Willowbrook to hire another 300 nurses and attendants, and maintain them through the next fiscal year. That will raise the total to 2900, which is still lower than the 3400 who were working under difficult conditions in November 1970 and far below the 4200 that the Federal government says are necessary.

Stein feels that the entire Mental Health Code should be rewritten, with the participation of the parents of retarded children, and that the California system should be the model. This would bring an end to total institutionalization, and set up day care centers, community centers, foster homes and other places where children could be cared for as individuals and still receive some minimal love and affection. Meanwhile, those children need immediate help.

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Willowbrook could use some unpaid volunteers, and the children need clothing. As a holding operation clothing and other help can be sent to the Women's Organization for Retarded Children, 18-15 215th St., Bayside, N. Y. 11360. It won't bring back the kids who have choked to death, it won't help the educable kids whose IQs have actually regressed from lack of care. But it's something to do until the politicians can figure a way to stop helping highways and architects and start helping some very damaged, vulnerable, and human New Yorkers.