



WILLOWBROOK: END OF THE LINE

Voice: Fred W. McDarrah

Willowbrook's children: our final shame

by Joe Flaherty

One wishes statistics would move us to passion, but they don't. Numbers are abstractions, lifeless equations that suffer, die, that are unemployed and unfed.

The bureaucrats know this, and that is why they take

refuge in numbers. The war is better, because the body count is lower. Unemployment is measured in percentage points, not in the loss of human dignity or distended stomachs.

No tears are recorded on a Bell curve, only the sly wrinkles of those who are trying to pacify us. Unless a digit is a subtraction from the sum total of our lives, we just chalk it up, like an insomniac counting sheep. The only people I know who take statistics to heart are baseball buffs.

After all, we can argue, in the dead circle of our emotional zero aren't other places on earth worse than America? In a list of hits and misses isn't it judicious to say that America is among the Top Ten in human endeavor? Sure, we blow a few, but even the Beatles had a couple of clinkers. It's all so soothing, but then to be twice removed is a safeguard we cherish.

But at Willowbrook State School the numbers are horribly animated: children with faces like twisted eights, children with legs like rickety ones, children with eyes poked out producing a light and a dark zero, bodies scattered over the floors like spilled bingo pills—all adding up to a hopeless naught. And the bureaucrats there want to blame it all on the cash register in Albany.

This seems too simple. Director Jack Hammond, who has supervised this seventh circle for 7½ years, was quoted by Howard Blum in this paper as having said the conditions were "intolerable and inhuman," but explained that "you can only do so much without money."

True, Albany has cut over \$37 million from the Mental Hygiene Department's budget, but why did Hammond not call our attention to the horrors at Willowbrook? (One shudders at the quasi-English country manor name of this dungeon.) Hammond was silent until Jane Kurtin of the Staten Island Advance and Geraldo Rivera of ABC's "Eyewitness News," with the aid of Dr. Michael Wilkins and social worker Liz Lee, broke the story. For being the prick to Hammond's conscience and for trying to organize the patients' parents, both Wilkins and Lee have been fired from the institution. Bureaucrats don't fancy numbers that don't stay in neat columns. The question is why Hammond himself didn't open the doors to the media to arouse the public to the "intolerable and inhuman" condi-

Page 1 of 3 pages