

Aged Volunteers Bring a Bit Of Sunshine to Willowbrook



Photographs for The New York Times by DON HOGAN CHARLES

At the Willowbrook State School on Staten Island, Mrs. Eva Voss assists a patient working on embroidery in the occupational therapy shop. Mrs. Voss belongs to SERVE, a volunteer group of older citizens whose members help out at Willowbrook.

By ROBERT HANLEY

At the Willowbrook State School on Staten Island, Mondays, Wednesdays and Thursdays are a little more active and a little more cheery than the other days of the week.

On these three days, groups of 60 to 70 elderly people brighten the dark world of the mentally retarded with a lot of kindness and a lot of help.

The elderly people are Staten Island residents who belong to a group called SERVE (Serve and Enrich Retirement by Volunteer Experience), a volunteer organization of the retired and elderly that is becoming a model for similar groups across the country.

On Thursday night, the group was honored as the nation's outstanding volunteers in 1971 at a dinner at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington.

Joseph Reina, an 80-year-old widower who works in Willowbrook's baby ward feeding inert children, accepted a plaque and a \$5,000 check from President Nixon.

Earlier in the day, the volunteers functioned as usual assisting the institution's

Lucille Navickas, a 57-year-old widow whose speech and step have been slowed by Parkinson's disease, wheeled 5-year-old Johnny around in his wheel chair before spoon-feeding the retarded child a lunch of liquified frankfurters and rice, beets and apricots.

Gave Carriage Rides

Other children in the babies' ward at Willowbrook were given their lunch and mid-morning carriage rides by Mary Healy, 74; Margaret Uske, 69; Ethel Pollack, 65, and Ethel Brown, 62, who is troubled by an ear ailment.

A floor below in a basement brimming with bags and boxes of donated clothing, 73-year-old Pearl Aanonsen, a retired nurse who suffers from arthritis, and 19 other elderly women were sorting the garments and numbering them for shipment to buildings housing male, female and infant patients.

In Willowbrook's carpentry shop, six retired men, all over 60, were enlarging the holes in the seats of plastic chairs and bolting them to metal frames, and replacing the worn handles on baby strollers with sanded pieces of old broomsticks.

In the machine shop downstairs, 72-year-old Henry Hansen, a machinist since his youth in Denmark, was grinding square floor tiles on a lathe into disks to be used as the bottoms of bags for the patients' toiletry items.

Helped in Weaving

In an occupational therapy section in another building, decorated with Valentine's Day hearts and pictures of Abraham Lincoln, a half-dozen volunteers were helping female patients chain strands of yarn and weave rugs, pot holders and covers for pillows.

Thursday's award was granted by the National Center for Voluntary Action, a nonprofit, privately funded organization dedicated to encouraging voluntary endeavors in the United States. The honor was the first given by the group since it took over the awards program from Lane Bryant, Inc., which, since 1948, had singled out individuals and groups each year for exceptional community service.

SERVE was chosen from among 250 volunteer groups nominated, a spokesman for the center said, because of its size, the economic diversity of its members, the scope of its activities and the depth of its organization.

The group was started in 1967 by its present sponsor, the Community Service Society of New York, a Manhattan-based nonprofit, nonsectarian social agency that has devoted itself since 1848 to

assisting poor families and the aging.

Surveys made in 1966 by the society showed that programs for the elderly were not "overly imaginative," said Mrs. Pollyanne Norman, the project coordinator on Staten Island.

"We wanted to get away from the stigma that we would just be users of their time. People over 60 do have tremendous amounts of skills and interests, and we wanted to do away with the whole attitude that people are through at 65."

In addition to Willowbrook institutions at which the SERVE volunteers assist include the United States Public Health Service Hospital, Staten Island Hospital and Manhattan State Hospital.

Other volunteers help prepare bloodmobile kits for the Red Cross and mailing lists for the American Cancer Society, restore books for distribution to needy children, assist parochial school teachers with pupils who have reading difficulties, make