



Edmund Gomez, right discusses math with participants in educational program at the Staten Island Urban League, Tompkinsville. English and science are also taught to current and former residents of Willowbrook State School.

Willowbrook 'grads' given help

By PETER HARRIGAN

"Four thousand, three hundred and twelve. Now how would you write that, Larry?" asks the teacher. The student writes, slowly, 4,312. "Good boy, Larry."

Although it may sound like a typical elementary school scene, it isn't. It's a special school being held on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons at the Staten Island branch of the New York Urban League's storefront facilities at 94-96-98 Victory Blvd., Tompkinsville.

Larry isn't an ordinary student, either. He is one of about 15 students, aged 16 to 22, in the program who are or were residents at Willowbrook State School.

According to David C. Smith, the Urban League's Island director, "These kids are learning because they want to learn." The ultimate goal of the program, which began in its present form early last month, is to bring the participants to an 8th or 12th grade equivalency level.

The idea of such a program began to develop last year when members of the International Union for Advancement, a group at Willowbrook, requested the use of the Urban League's facilities to conduct an educational program for former residents of the school.

"All we did at the time was let them have the key," Smith recalls. However, when in December Skill Advancement Inc., an affiliate of the Urban League, was funded to conduct educational programs in the five boroughs, Smith approached the president of the International Union for Advancement, Eager Smith, and expressed a desire to involve the Willowbrook students in such a program.

"Our program wasn't a reaction to the situation at Willowbrook," David Smith said referring to the recent controversy between parents, employes and administrators at the institution. "We were aware of it."

NEEDED SERVICE

Both he and Eager Smith spoke of the necessity of such a program as a supplement to the education offered at Willowbrook and as an alternative to the situation presently experienced by many persons released from the school.

While all persons released are placed with families, "this is done without feeling for the kids," Eager Smith, who is employed at Willowbrook, said. "They are given no jobs. How is a kid supposed to live," he asked. He also charged that many ex-patients return to the school grounds "because they don't know anyone else," only to be threatened with arrest for trespassing.

Both men hope that in time participants in the Urban League's program will be able to find employment and "be on their own" to a large degree. Most want office jobs, such as multi-line operators, messengers and mail room clerks.

Advance.

February 13, 1972

The program is oriented to prepare participants for this type of work by teaching them basic math, English usage and science. Two professionally-trained teachers, Edmund Gomez and Mrs. Joan Wick, are provided by Skill Advancement and work with the students for several hours each Tuesday and Thursday afternoon.

Both attempt to motivate participants to learn, and use audio-visual and other up-to-date techniques as an integral part of their teaching. A more personal atmosphere is also encouraged as students and teachers alike sit around large tables in attractively-painted, carpeted rooms.

Funding for the program comes from a combination of sources. The teachers are paid by Skill Advancement, while additional personnel, such as job counselors, are on the Urban League's payroll. But the ward workers at Willowbrook, those who are perhaps closest to the students at Willowbrook, also help out by purchasing books and other materials, and by providing transportation to and from the school twice a week.

A volunteer Miss Lucy Vitale,

also works with students, teaching them music and how to play instruments, such as the guitar.

The success or failure of the program is difficult to determine at this point, David Smith claimed, both because it is still in its formative stages and also because thus far the response of prospective employers has been less than encouraging.

NEED A CHANCE

"We need sympathetic employers," Smith said. "Sympathetic in the sense that they are willing to give a kid a chance." He added, "There's really nothing greatly wrong with any of these kids."

Only three employers have expressed an interest in hiring those who participate in the program, Smith noted, and that was after a filmed report on the program was shown on a local television station news show. Although several persons were sent for interviews, no jobs materialized.

The five-month grant which is funding the program is due to expire in May. "Whether it's going to be continued or not is a big question," Smith noted. "We do want to continue it, but the real question is whether we ought to."

"The employers have got to do something to help. We can train them, but unless someone gives them a job, it is all in vain."

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