

One volunteer's own story



Kitchen volunteers prepare a meal for patients in one of Willowbrook's large dining halls.

5.1. Advance Photos by Tony Carannadio

The volunteers were slowly trickling into Willowbrook State School. They were coming from places like White Plains and Bay Ridge, as well as Staten Island. Many of them had relatives in the stricken institution. Others were there because they felt they were needed.

A group of young volunteers in a Chevrolet stopped near the picket lines for directions. A

woman carrying a placard called them scabs. "Why don't you bring one of those kids home," she hollered, "then you'd really see what it's like." The volunteers said nothing and began to drive on. As they left, the woman sneered "Have a nice Easter."

Beyond the picket lines, deep in the heart of the sprawling

Peter Cava of 64 City Blvd., West Brighton, is a free-lance writer. He spent the weekend as a volunteer at Willowbrook.

estate, a group of volunteers were trying to maintain a semblance of feeding and sanitary care. The two wards in this building house about one hundred patients, all physically and mentally retarded. Few, if any, are toilet trained.

Most of the volunteers had been working since morning, spending their Easter Sunday cleaning and feeding the patients. One lone Willowbrook supervisor, a middle-aged woman, scurried from ward to ward giving instructions and encouragement.

A few seasonal decorations hung on the ugly walls. One of the patients had a chocolate Easter egg. He had smeared the chocolate on himself and his clothes, and gurgled incomprehensibly while a Bronx college student tried to clean him.

"This strike is unpardonable," voiced one of the volunteers, a nurse in her mid-twenties. "It's worse than murder." She said she was from California and wanted to return. The more I see of New



Frank Wludyka of Clark, N.J., who gave up his Easter to volunteer at Willowbrook, comforts a retarded boy. Wludyka's wife helped him take five truckloads of clothing to the institution.

York, the less I like it. How they could abandon these children is beyond me."

As she spoke, one of the patients began banging his head rhythmically against the metal part of his bed. The supervisor explained how the boy normally given tranquilizers, but no one there was qualified to administer sedatives.

One of the volunteers opened a window, trying to relieve the awful stench of untended human excrement. Meanwhile, a Westchester housewife and her two teenage daughters went through the wards, changing the patients' sheets and dishes.

"And the parents actually have to pay money for this kind of treatment," she muttered, noticing a large sore on one of the patients. She told of her own mentally retarded daughter who lives at home. "Compared to these poor kids, she's normal," said the housewife.

The young man who had opened the windows went outside for a breath of fresh air. "I'm used to it," said a pretty co-ed from Pennsylvania, who had been spending her spring vacation with friends in Westerleigh. "I've been working in places like this for a long time. People

should come down from their ivory towers and get a good look at what goes on here."

Of all the volunteers, she seemed to understand best the needs of the patients. "About the only means of communication they have is to bite their hand," she explained. "Badly brain-damaged children usually have scar tissue all over their hands. A lot of these kids don't. They can't communicate at all."

"What a way to spend Easter," cracked a long-haired, bearded young man carrying a bedpan, trying to interject some humor into the depressing situation.

But it wasn't really Easter. For the volunteer workers, it was a strange sort of Good Samaritan's Woodstock. For the patients, it was just another day. They knew nothing of strikes or holidays.