

# When a television reporter joins the scene

By WILLIAM HUUS

It's difficult to criticize a popular figure and make your point when people are enraptured with the man and can't see beneath the surface. It's also difficult to point out a weakness in a man who has genuinely done some good.

Such a man is Geraldo Rivera, the long-haired, "Puerto Rican" idol of the television news set. Geraldo is a good sociologist, an excellent entertainer and a shallow reporter.

He seizes on emotions, while barely skimming the surface of the problems, and presents his case with a tear-jerking quality which other journalists feel should be reserved for the soap operas that precede his daily appearance.

ABC-TV should consider running their Eyewitness News broadcasts before a live audience.

This may sound like sour grapes. In a way, it is. It may sound like I'm jealous. I am.

I am jealous because television has become such a powerful force that it can touch the hearts of so many, evoke needed changes and take all the credit.

It's sour grapes because television misses the minds of so many and isn't doing the job it could, or should be doing. And sour grapes because of Willowbrook.

Advance reporter Jane Kurtin exposed the horrid conditions at Willowbrook State School in No-

vember and worked diligently for two months, while making meaningful progress at the state government level, before Geraldo arrived on the scene.

Granted, he knew a good story when he saw one and was correct in wanting to publicize the conditions and bring about change.

The fact remains, however, that the tearful, humble, promise - to - solve - this - for - you - people - out - there Geraldo on the TV screen was different than the strutting, showboating personality who arrived at Willowbrook and told all the newspaper reporters present, "I'm here to shake that dude (then director of the school Jack Hammond) down."

Geraldo became famous overnight for his provocative coverage of the shocking treatment being meted out at the state facility. He did one good thing—he gave the problem broader publicity.

But his coverage stopped short of a meaningful investigation into the personal and governmental reasons why the tragedy he portrayed exists.

When the state Legislature began moving its wheels to take action that would begin improving conditions at Willowbrook, actions which have thus far been inadequate, it was because of the seeds sown by Jane Kurtin.

She planted them deeply and tended them carefully and they were well on their way to growth when Geraldo joined in to speed up the process.

I was in Albany during the final weeks of the legislative session in May. Geraldo was there too, having told his audience he was going to the state capitol to "make sure that something is done."

I saw him do little more than flamboyantly attempt to impress people with his presence and report back to New York every night that nothing had been done yet but he would "keep on fighting."

What disturbs me is that this news technique has become successful. Geraldo won dozens of awards for his "reporting" on Willowbrook. The spotlight shone brighter on him than it did on the problem by the time he had exhausted everyone's emotions on Willowbrook and decided to move to another campaign.

His latest effort is an investigation of the plight of migrant workers, whom he theatrically says, while clutching a clump of soil, can be obtained "dirt cheap."

Another cause worthy of investigation. Another chance to play on audience sympathy and capitalize on a subject on which everyone will agree with you. And perhaps another topic which will drift into oblivion without real investigation when the campaign gets stale.

Geraldo's success seems to point out that television news programs are moving away from thought and toward emotion, sacrificing facts for feelings. That's something to cry about.