

Willowbrook visit: A grunt... fright...hands touch...tears

By KENNETH GROSS

They tried to prepare Steven Sherman, 13. This will not be pretty, he was told. You will be frightened, he was told. But nothing could prepare him for Willowbrook.

Sherman was one of 100 seventh, eighth and ninth graders from Carr Junior High School in Whitestone, Queens, who came to Willowbrook State School yesterday to throw a Christmas party.

A moment earlier, the youngsters had been singing and joking, but as the two buses swung into the driveway of the state institution, everyone suddenly became quiet. The inmates strolled by with their uncomplicated smiles and lopsided hats — and the children from Queens sat soberly, with their balloons and party hats and boxes of presents on their laps.

"I expected that it would be neater, cleaner, like a hospital," said Steven Sherman.

Four wards radiate off the corridors of Building 76. The retarded inmates were locked in, behind wooden gates.

"They will want to touch you," said Leslee Cassel, 14, a 9th-grader who had attended a similar outing last year. "Don't be frightened. You may think that they want to hurt you but they just want to touch you."

Slowly, like reluctant swimmers testing a chilly surf, the visiting youngsters trickled into the wards. Louis DiFazio 14, held the hand of a 12-year-old. They walked around the ward and the retarded inmate

named objects: "clock," he said pointing up to the clock. "Fan."

DiFazio nodded. Another youngster grabbed DiFazio, tearing at his shirt. For a moment, DiFazio was frightened. Then he recognized that the inmate merely wanted attention.

The inmate could not speak. He grunted. But they found a way to communicate. The inmate jumped up and tried to touch a ledge where a television set was fastened. He kept it up until DiFazio joined in.

A record player had a soul record going, and the children with "B-76" stenciled on their shirts jumped up and down in time with the music. They did not do it alone. They held tightly to the hands of the visitors as they bounced.

Before the arrival of the JHS 194 students, the Willowbrook children had been sitting listlessly under the care of several attendants. Now they greedily attached themselves to the outsiders.

Not all the youngsters were able to bring themselves to enter the wards. Some were

driven back by the smell — a combination of urine, vomit and disinfectant.

"I had considered going into special education," said Phyllis Lutsky, 14, a 9th grader. "But now that I see how upset I got, I know I can't go into it."

Outside, Enrico greeted everyone coming off the bus. "Hello," he said holding out his hand to shake. "My name is Enrico." Enrico is 49 years old.

Over and over again, he would tell the junior high school students that he had been abandoned by his family and

that no one loved him. Soothingly, the young girls hugged him and told him that he was loved.

"Take me home with you," Enrico would ask at last, and none of the children knew how to answer that question satisfactorily.

"We can't," said one. And Enrico could not understand.

Denise Curtis, 14, one of the organizers of the party, had been to Willowbrook last year and knew what to expect. She walked around holding hands

with a boy she called Allen. He was about 10.

His name was not really Allen, but all he could say was "yes," and so she stopped testing names with "Allen" and accepted him as that. Silently, they walked form ward to ward, holding hands. Every once in a while, "Allen" would burst into laughter.

Someone wondered how they would explain the day to their classmates. They agreed that they couldn't. There is no way to prepare anyone for Willowbrook.