

# Dr. Hammond showed courage

By LAWRENCE DE MARIA

I met Dr. Jack Hammond only a couple of times.

It was during the disgraceful strike at Willowbrook State School when hundreds of workers abandoned their helpless charges to the compassion of their fellow citizens over a salary dispute during the Easter holidays.

Fortunately, those fellow citizens came through — as did Dr. Hammond.

Courage has been described as grace under pressure. That fits what the doctor exhibited during that trying week.

It is de rigueur to say only nice things about the dead. Having only seen and spoken to Dr. Hammond two days in my entire life, I probably have less right to say anything at all about him than most. Moreover, from what I understand about the whole Willowbrook mess, Dr. Hammond was responsible for some bad judgment.

Nevertheless, since I truly believe that what happened at Willowbrook last year helped kill Dr. Hammond, and since I also believe that we are all partly responsible for Willowbrook, I damn well will say something nice about him.

There was no disgrace in being director of Willowbrook, as Dr. Hammond was, or in exposing conditions there, as this news paper did.

Dr. Hammond, although he was pummeled in the press, both print and television, was never an entirely unsympathetic figure. He was so recognizably a scapegoat that just about everyone concerned admitted it.

That is not to say that he got off easy. When your job, the institution you have devoted much of your life to, is pictured as a modern Dachau, you must make some effort to defend yourself, if you are to keep your self-respect and that of your subordinates.

When the chancre of Willowbrook broke open, all that many people saw was Geraldo Rivera asking Hammond unanswerable questions. When you don't answer a question the immediate reaction among your listeners is that you are covering up, or don't care.

The only way Dr. Hammond could effectively answer those questions would be by correcting the conditions at Willowbrook. If he had the money to do that, the questions would never have been asked.

Dr. Hammond made mistakes. He fired workers for their criticism. On a number of occasions he should have publicly laid the blame where it belonged, in Albany. We will never know why he didn't, but I don't think he held back because he was afraid for his job. He was a cooked goose at Willowbrook as soon as the story broke anyway.

Scapegoat, remember?

As far as I can recall, Dr. Hammond never lost his composure during the first Willowbrook ordeal. And I was there during the strike, his second crisis, and I can attest to Dr. Hammond's "grace under pressure."

When the union went out, Dr. Hammond was caught with thousands of people to feed, bathe and clothe, many of whom could do none of those things at all. A few loyal and

compassionate workers stayed on. They could not bear the thought of leaving helpless and innocent men, women and children to the mercies of only volunteer help.

And volunteer help flowed in. Thousands of volunteers, of all ages. Grandparents, college students, teen-agers, priests, ministers, rabbis, firemen, policemen, bartenders, bus drivers, housewives, lawyers, doctors — thousands.

Dr. Hammond used them all, and to good effect. He stayed at his post round the clock as his institution teetered on its foundations. He would have come out of it some sort of hero, but for the fact that he was now forever linked with Willowbrook's scandal.

He had to put up with a union picket line that was composed of people who, from their demeanor and language, probably qualified for admittance to Willowbrook.

He had to contend with reporters who tried to get him, groggy from lack of sleep, to say things against his superiors, who, whatever their previous shortcomings, were now fighting an illegal strike.

And he had to contend with a plague of politicians who descended on Willowbrook, held their noses at its smells and closed their eyes at its sights, and criticized everything and anything.

Through all this Dr. Hammond remained congenial. He never once refused to answer one of my questions. He took time to offer me some coffee and talk to me privately. He looked so tired I thought him a prime candidate for a heart attack then and there. He seemed to hold no grudges against my newspaper for exposing conditions at Willowbrook.

When it was over I saw his subordinates come in and shake his hand and wish him well. Even the union leaders came in and did that.

It is significant that when Dr. Hammond left Willowbrook he was given another school to direct, in Rome, N.Y. It was there that he died last Tuesday of that heart attack.

Willowbrook is still here. Geraldo is still here. Rockefeller is still here. The politicians are all still here. The shame is still here.

Only Dr. Hammond is gone.