



Big Bird

## Big Bird Lands at Willowbrook

By Cora Hoffman

Staten Island — A seven and one-half foot canary came within a feather's breadth of being plucked by the admiring hands of Willowbrook State School residents.

Big Bird, in deference to his fragile yellow plumage, was the only member of the Sesame Street cast who remained on stage during a recent special performance for 650 residents at the state school. And, when some of his fans decided to get up on the platform and join the show, the bird deftly sidestepped their loving embraces.

The rest of the cast — Bob, David, Luis, Maria and Gordon — went into the audience, touching the children on their hands, arms and heads to emphasize a song which teaches the parts of the body and urged the children to repeat the lyrics into the microphone.

According to Gordon, real name, Harold Miller, the show at Willowbrook was modified to allow for more repetition of the educational message — and the fun — for the retarded youngsters. And the kids loved it.

They eagerly followed Bob McGrath, the show's leader, in singing "this is my hair, my hair is beautiful; this is my skin, my skin is beautiful." Those who could not talk touched their hair and skin and smiled as they kept time with the music.

The last stanza of the song saw cast and audience linking

hands and singing "These are my friends...my friends are beautiful," and ended with hugs for everyone.

The performance and an afternoon workshop at Willowbrook by staff members of the Children's Television Workshop were arranged by Hospital Audiences, Inc., a nonprofit organization that brings entertainment to institutionalized people and also escorts residents of psychiatric hospitals, state schools, addiction centers and prisons to cultural events in their local communities.

The workshop for about 20 patient-care employees was conducted by Sarah Connolly and Margaret Blizard of the Children's Television Workshop's community education service.

Emphasizing that Sesame Street is not merely entertainment for the younger set, Mrs. Connolly outlined the show's four basic education goals. The first, cognitive organization, she explained as the skills children need to know in order to learn. These include perception of sizes, shapes and spatial relationships.

She said the second goal, symbolic representation, not only teaches the children to recognize numbers and letters, but also relates these symbols to the real world.

Reasoning and problem solving, the third major category, is the source of a lot of fun on Sesame Street, according to Mrs. Connolly. For example, the audience is urged to help Big

Bird figure out how to get some salt he spilled back into the shaker, or to help the Cookie Monster find out who made off with his favorite food.

The final teaching goal, man and his world, helps the child become familiar with himself and his environment, Mrs. Connolly explained. It is in pursuit of this aim that songs are made up about the parts of the body and the cast exaggerates their display of emotion during the shows.

Emphasizing the importance of using all the senses to gain knowledge, Mrs. Connolly said, "Television can do a lot, but it only uses sight and sound." She urged the workshop participants to make up games and exercises to reinforce the lessons and concepts of the show by using touch, smell and other active participation by the children.

For example, she said, a game of "Simon says" or "musical chairs" can be used to reinforce the concept of up and down. Letters and numbers can be cut out of different materials such as felt and sandpaper so the children can feel them.

Many of the Willowbrook employees said they had never realized that Sesame Street was so carefully planned or offered so much more than entertainment to its audience.

They felt the workshop, along with the booklets suggesting reinforcing activities which were distributed, gave them an insight into the show's real purpose and would be of great help in teaching some of the basic concepts at the state school.