

Look at the little crippled kid... Who cares if she'd like to walk?

By ROBERT E. HUBER

Haja Lopez,
Of the Willowbrook State
School.

Six-years old. Big eyes and splendid eyelashes. At turns affectionate, inquisitive, audacious. Always bright. A little shy around men, but if you sit down and talk to her, eye-to-eye, you get on famously with her.

She doesn't know her name means jewel in Spanish. Observers know it by intuition in a minute.

They also know she is crippled. She was born with a disease called spina bifida.

Spina bifida is an affliction of the nervous system that has caused paralysis in Haja's legs. Her legs are useless. But her arms and chest and torso are strong. She conveys that

strength to her crutches which drag her legs along.

Her mind is unimpaired. She is a normal little girl. Not retarded, and what is more surprising she is not shy — a usual by-product of life in an institution.

She has lived at Willowbrook all her life.

Haja was placed in the Willowbrook State School

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Haja Lopez receives mathematics instruction from Mrs. Marilyn Sesky at Willowbrook State School.

S.I. Advance Photo by Robert Parsons

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Who cares if she ever walks?

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following a series of motor tests given her when she was still a baby. Since these tests are administered and graded solely on the child's reflex and perceptual acuity, a child suffering from spina bifida would score low. And be considered retarded. Haja scored low. Doctors advised she be sent to the Willowbrook State School.

Tests given her later based on color identification and verbal instruction bear different results. Haja scores well. Well enough not to be considered

retarded, or even dull.

She was a late bloomer and that is normal for spina bifida children. She is reasonable and warm. And therapy will help her mobility.

The therapy she needs is available at the Haverstraw Clinic in Westchester, N.Y. It seems simple enough. Send her up to Westchester, give her therapy and let her walk out.

But there is a hitch. Haverstraw prefers accepting children in their program if the child has a home once the therapy is over.

Haja wants a home.

"She deserves a home," says her social worker Karen Myerson. "She has a lot of love. Everyone falls in love with Haja."

Not everyone. She still does not have foster parents.

All of Haja's medical bills are paid, and the state would allow a foster family \$200 a month for the pleasure of her company. (Money which is not taxable income.)

Haja is a bright little girl, but her surroundings could drown her.

Her classmates are retarded or so physically handicapped to make them incapable of reason. Children born blind and deaf. Their days spent in what seems senseless gyrations, uninformed by language, color or sound.

Some barely speak, others barely move; they sit in class with stares as deadly as lead winter skies.

Haja sits with them. Talks to them. From time to time they respond to her. By speech or by touch or whatever.

Haja gets on well with adults — her councilors, teachers and visitors. Haja likes that. Most of her friends have gone to Haverstraw or Blythedale Hospitals where they receive therapy. Most of them will be placed in foster homes. Those friends of hers, excepting their spina bifida, were normal.

Now, Haja is left behind.

"She'd be ideal in a foster family," says Willowbrook psychologist, Ellen Zaplin. "In a family environment with love and stable relations she'd shine."

Haja is still waiting.

Inquiries about Haja should be sent to Karen Myerson, Willowbrook State School. Phone 698-1440, ext. 857.