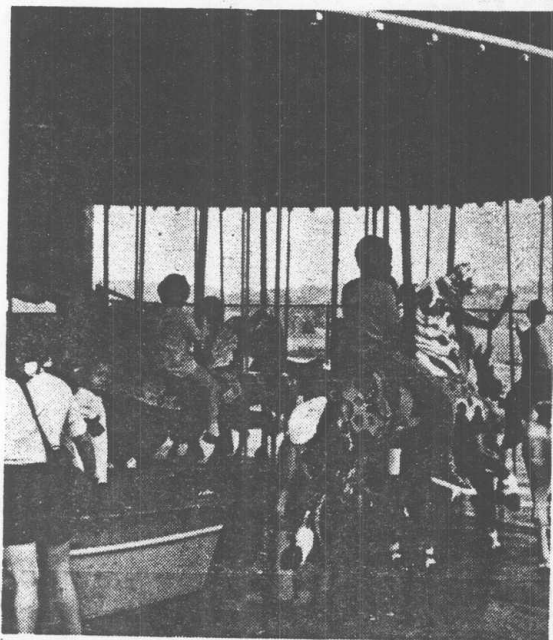


# FOCUS



Carousel is popular summer attraction for Willowbrook youngsters. (Photo by Daniel Richards)

## Summer aides give Willowbrook kids a treat

Despite ongoing criticism of Willowbrook State School -- renamed the Willowbrook Developmental Center -- summer activities, at least, appear to be on the upswing. Thanks to the nearly 100 college students hired by the institution for the summer, residents of all ages and handicaps are being treated to a life which is a bit more consistent with the activities of any other person during the leisurely summer months.

"There's so much more for them to do now," says Andrea Torregrossa, a recreation aide in Building 21. "In the winter these kids don't go outside at all -- there's nothing for them to do except go to school, and besides, there's no one to take them anywhere."

Each year, the institution makes a special effort to hire predominantly college students who act as recreation aides, pool and gymnasium attendants, and personal care attendants for the more severely retarded. Many of the students have spent previous summers working at the institution, and find it especially rewarding to work with the same patients each summer.

Pat Luisi, 20, and Melvin Caldwell, 22, are winding up their second summer in building 29 which houses spastic youngsters, most of whom are confined to wheelchairs and beds. "These residents," Luisi explained, "are anywhere between 9 and 15 years old. But they have an I.Q. of a baby."

Their diligence in handling these profoundly handicapped children is evidenced by the patience they demonstrate in doing those personal chores

that others might find distasteful. "We both volunteered for this particular building," said Caldwell, "because we like the people and the kids."

Their duties include showering, dressing, feeding, and just making them comfortable," said Luise, a business major at Pace University. "Only five in this whole building can walk, and very few of them go on trips. All we can do for them is keep them clean and take them outside in the fresh air if it's sunny."

However, both expressed displeasure with an apparent lack of clothing for these residents. "It gets very annoying to just put diapers on them all the time but when it's a holiday or visitors' day, they always seem to have clothes for them."

On the positive side, Caldwell, who is starting Hunter College in the fall, found that this year, more professionals have been added to the staff in Building 29, especially in the areas of physical therapy, speech therapy, and motivation. "The attendants aren't really trained to do anything more than personal care, but they're all good people to work with," he adds.

Andrea Torregrossa, as well as the other student aides interviewed by the Register, are not, as one might think, planning careers in mental retardation. Most just enjoy the opportunity to entertain and recreate the many youngsters at Willowbrook who rarely get such personalized attention.

"We usually have charge of 4 to 10 children," said Torregrossa, "and they're really good. About half of them are educable -- they go to school everyday. The other half are at the trainable level," she says.

Torregrossa, as do most of the recreation aides, has virtually complete control of her wards' recreational itinerary. "On the grounds, we can take them to the pool, the carousel, or the playground. Or we can play volleyball with them."

The 21 year-old Wagner College art major has found that with a group of eight or more, two aides assigned to the group can provide more individual attention. "The girl who used to work with me here had to leave, but when you take 8 or 10 kids out by yourself, it's a lot more difficult for just one person to control them."

Torregrossa has taken her youngsters on ferry trips, and to the park in her own car for which she must get special permission. "But it's easy to entertain these kids," she continued. "They love to participate in games or draw in coloring books. They love to watch baseball games even if they don't really understand what's going on."

Movies, trips to the zoo, and bowling sessions are also popular pastimes for these youngsters.

"The swimming pool," she said, "works for itself, because they play with each other in the water and they get exercise. The swings in the playground, however, don't hold their attention because they can't concentrate on moving their body weight to get motion," she adds.

For those mongoloid children in her charge, says Torregrossa, a year round program of physical activity should be mandatory. "When mongoloid children get older they tend to gain weight. That's why I'd like to see the state build an indoor swimming pool for them and hire more staff so that they can go out more often during the rest of the year."