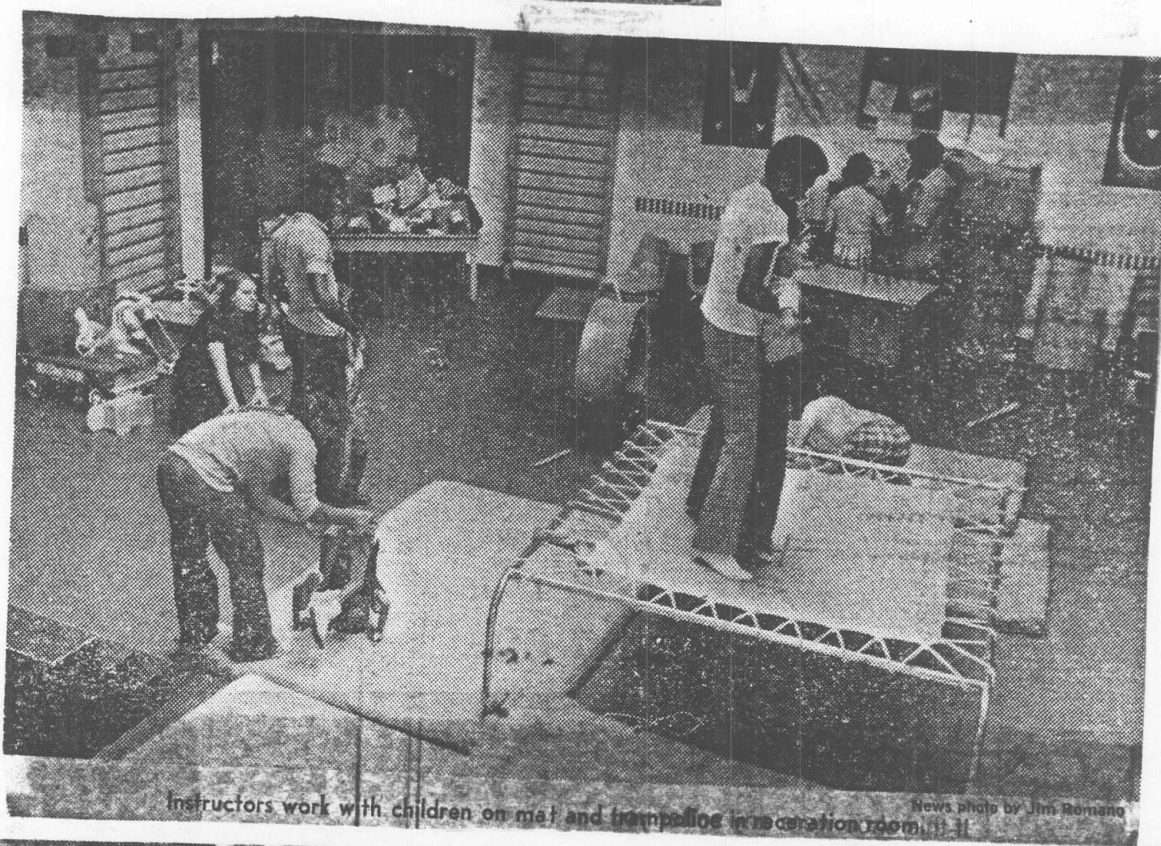


Willowbrook Is Getting Better— Slowly



Instructors work with children on mat and trampolines in recreation room. News photo by Jim Romano

By MARY ENGELS

"Willowbrook is like a city. It has its good buildings and its bad buildings." That was the assessment of Howard Hellman, unit chief of Building 18 at the Willowbrook Developmental Center on Staten Island.

He was speaking nearly three years after Willowbrook's "bad buildings"—characterized by too many residents, too few staffers and too little effort to provide good programs—had landed the school for the retarded in a major scandal. Today, after budget funds were added, there is more staff and much less overcrowding.

'Way Out Program'

Hellman said he works for one of the "good buildings" at the center. His building features a "Way Out Program" for the residents.

The program, which was introduced a year ago by Dr. Eric Sheldon, chief of Willowbrook's Rehabilitation Services, is designed to teach residents how to adapt to a home like atmosphere and learn to live in a community either in their own homes or a group-home environment.

Since the program started, about 20 residents have been moved out of Willowbrook and into communities.

Sheldon confessed to having trouble getting the program started.

"When we began," he said, "we were confronted with smashed equipment, not once but twice. We knew it was the staff," he said. "They'd reasoned that if we could teach 36 residents how to make it out of here, then there would no longer be any need for the employees to stay either and a loss of jobs would result."

Feed Motivation by Fear

"Fear motivated them, so we had to show them there was nothing to fear," he said.

Sheldon said the whole picture changed when the employees were told that if the program was successful, there would be more opportunities for work, not fewer.

"When morale is lousy, the place is, too. It's when Willowbrook employees are working successfully that the morale is up," said Sheldon. He conceded that all is not good throughout the complex.

"Sure, there has been progress, but not as much as we'd like. It's slow but it's happening," Sheldon said.

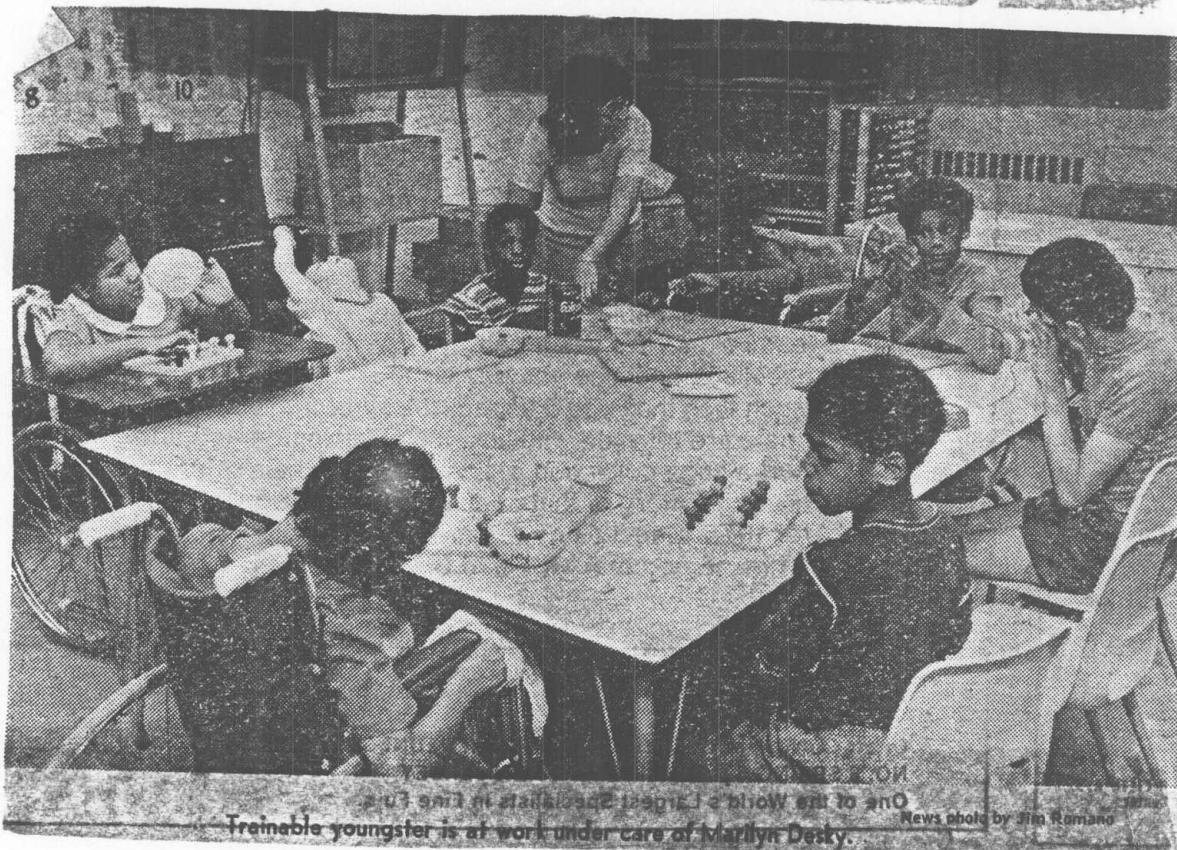
"Willowbrook is like Rip Van Winkle, asleep for years. Suddenly the giant started stirring," he said. "Stone age" ideas about care were in conflict with "rudely thrust modern expectations, which included rehabilitation instead of mere medical custody. Staff wasn't equipped for that. They had to learn. Granted, progress is slow, but it's there," he declared.

It was certainly much in evidence in Building 18, with its brightly decorated classrooms and recreation room.

"It's come a long way in a few years," said the nursing administrator, Peg Bilyck. "We even have our own dental clinic."

Educational programs are geared not only to the mentally retarded but also to those whose retardation is compounded by other handicaps. One classroom, for example, had 12 deaf and blind stu-

dent. "The Willowbrook problem that in many instances we have to try to teach the almost unteachable, such as the case with the blind and deaf. But we're at least trying," said Sheldon.



Traineable youngster is at work under care of Marilyn Desty.

News photo by Jim Romano

Parents sometimes complain that enough isn't being done on this score. The doctor replies: "It's terribly easy outside to say something should be done. But how do we do it?"

"It's a management problem. Those who are naive can easily say: 'Get three teachers.' But you have to put them through recruitment, orientation, get the space, get the equipment. You have to plan a year ahead and find the money. That's reality. We're trying to provide first-rate care and if it doesn't come about, it won't be because we haven't got the bumps, bruises and scratches" from trying.

Another Willowbrook problem is reported incidents of patient abuse of residents by staff, as well as employe harassment of other employes, vandalism and theft.

"In all cases," Sheldon said, "you have to have proof. There are rules and regulations and you can't just fire an employe because someone may not like the way he combs his hair. Witnesses have to testify. There has to be evidence. Due process is aimed to protect the good but it sometimes keeps in the system those who are less than good.

"This isn't only a Willowbrook phenomenon," the doctor noted. "It's a human one. Where you have employes of good will, you'll also have a small core of sadists, bullies, 'I-don't-give-a-damn' types to contend with."

Population Down to 3,300

Only a week ago an attendant in Building 8 complained of being threatened and harassed. The incident stirred up a clamor by parents who criticized Willowbrook for "lack of concern."

"The concern is there. It's the proof we must have," Sheldon said.

Building 8, the doctor admits, is not one of Willowbrook's best. Lack of supervision is the reason

At a recent visit, Sheldon noted that the residents were on one side during a recreation period. The staff were on the other.

It shouldn't be that person who's been with the resident," he said. "When an attendant doesn't do anything, he or she becomes apathetic and morale goes down."

Morale certainly seemed to be down in Building 8 where employes voiced their discontent openly.

Nancy Begley, ward supervisor, complained of being harassed by other employes. "There's a breakdown in supervision," she admitted. "Employe morale is low."

Around 1960 the number of residents at Willowbrook was about 6,500. By the time of the scandal of early 1972, the number had been reduced by the administration to about 5,500, but the number of staff had been cut even more drastically because of budget shortages.

Now there are 3,300 residents, according to Dr. Moidrag Ristich, director of the center. Of these, most are from New York City, a few from upstate and approximately 180 from Staten Island. For nearly three years there have been no new admissions.

Ristich said, "We will not even consider admitting patients" until the number of residents is reduced to 2,970.

At Willowbrook, most tried to stay. The reason? One attendant in Building 13 put it this way: "You've got to be dedicated."

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