

Society's Warehouses

There are dark corners in America where people are trampled, broken and forgotten. The saddest of these—and the most demeaning to our society—are those institutions, paid for and run by the public, where people are stashed away for the safety and convenience of the rest of us and then left to rot untouched by the collective conscience of the community. Attica and Soledad turned flickering attention toward the prisons; but few have cared to look at those huddled in the rotten crannies of America's public mental institutions.

Last month the Supreme Court gave some hope that it will use the powerful lever of the Fourteenth Amend-

ment to pry open doors that an enlightened citizenry should have forced open years ago. It took the case of a man named Kenneth Donaldson, who, after civil commitment, spent fifteen years in a Florida State Hospital. When he was committed, the judge told Mr. Donaldson that he was being sent away for "a few weeks" to "take some of this new medication." Mr. Donaldson received no medication and no treatment and finally, in 1971, he filed suit for his freedom and for damages.

During his stay in the hospital, Mr. Donaldson's home was a locked room with 60 beds jammed side by side. At least a third of the residents of that room were deemed criminally insane. Mr. Donaldson's "treatment" was described by his doctors as "milieu therapy"—that is being hospitalized with other mental patients.

Kenneth Donaldson is out now and thanks to the courts and the Fourteenth Amendment, he may also receive some recompense for his fifteen years. But there are tens of thousands of Kenneth Donaldsons both out of sight and out of mind. The Fourteenth Amendment can't operate as a civilizing influence for all of them. Only the decent impulses of the society can do that.