



Mrs. Evelyn Stockert, right, has a long way to go before she can cross off the names of all of Willowbrook's 3,500 residents off her shopping list. Helping her arrange the meager supply of this year's holiday gift donations is Miss Linda Fonti.

S.I. Advance Photo by Frank Johns

Willowbrook's 'boutique' keeper feeling pinch in gift donations

By SANDRA ZUMMO

On entering building 18 of the Willowbrook Developmental Center, you get the impression that disaster has struck.

There are clothes everywhere and a careless step too far to the right or left could land a visitor in a heap at the top of a carton of plastic toys.

Moving amid the confusion of this, Willowbrook's "boutique," is a small, nerve-charged woman with salt-and-pepper hair, named Evelyn Stockert.

"The boutique doesn't usually look like this," she tells you as you follow her yellow work smock through a maze of jackets, blouses and dolls. "It's only because it's Christmas that we're so disorganized."

As you speak to Mrs. Stockert, you get the feeling that even though she's standing still, she's working just the same.

That's not too difficult to understand when you realize that there are six shopping days remaining 'til Christmas, and she hasn't checked off every name on her Christmas shopping list of Willowbrook's 3,500 residents.

As a matter of fact, she hasn't even checked off half.

"This is the worst year we've had in the eight years that I've handled the Christmas gifts," she says of donations from the public.

"It's dropped a little each year, but never like this. We usually have enough to present each resident with an article of clothing and a toy, but this

year we'll be lucky if we can give everyone one gift."

Pointing to four or five cartons of Fisher-Price toys, new and un-opened, she says that they were surplus from last year and had been donated from a store.

Leading you behind a rack of men's suits, she shows you boxes containing about 200 used toys which have been donated thus far. Another pile of used toys lies beside a rack of children's suits.

"These just came in," she says, "but some of them can't be used." Picking up a word game called "Perquacky," a fast-paced scrabble-type game, she continues, "Some toys, like this one, are just too advanced. People mean well, but chess sets and Monopoly are just of no use to the severely retarded."

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What types of toys does Willowbrook need?

"Soft, squeeze toys," Mrs. Stockert advises, "toys that won't hurt the children; toys they can sleep with and cuddle."

"They also love things that make noise, things they can do something with. Anything with music is also popular and toys that you have to crank or manipulate in any way are excellent as they greatly aid in occupational therapy."

Having worked as an attendant in one of the wards for five of her 13 years as an employe of Willowbrook, Mrs. Stockert knows well the needs of her "customers."

Each article of clothing which comes into the boutique is washed, ironed and displayed by her and her assistant, and toys are checked to make sure that metal, a number one hazard in toys for Willowbrook residents, is present on none.

Some of the toys she receives are too dirty to be used.

"People should send toys that are as clean as possible," she says, explaining that the children are very susceptible to germs and prone to infection.

Under normal circumstances Mrs. Stockert's boutique does a brisk "business," many times sending upward of 150 pieces of clothing to various wards in the space of an hour.

But, as with toys, the amount of clothing available for Christmas giving at Willowbrook is also diminishing and it is becoming difficult for her, in these last days before the holiday, to make up her plastic-wrapped packages of skirts and blouses, shirts and ties, for distribution in the wards.

"Everyone loves to receive

clothes," she says smiling. "Every little girl, no matter how profoundly retarded, loves to wear a pretty dress and pretty little shoes..."

But, if more clothing donations are not forthcoming, many little girls at Willowbrook, at least, the non-ambulatory ones, will not receive them this Christmas.

Robert Flavin, director of volunteer services there, says that if there is a shortage of clothing available what there is will most likely be distributed to ambulatory patients, since they do go out into the community on various outings.

Non-ambulatory patients would receive the toys. Flavin, who blames the dwindling number of donations on the economic problems most Americans are experiencing, does not want to draw that line.

"Last year we distributed 26,000 gifts at Christmas-time," he recalls, "but this year, we can't even guarantee one gift per person.

"If we have to cut down, we'll have to begin our Christmas list with the non-ambulatory patients, as they are not as fortunate as the others who can attend parties given for them by various community groups.

"Then, we'll have to work our way up the ladder. It's not something that we want to do, but we'll have to do it, if we want to insure these children a happy holiday..."

Meanwhile, Evelyn Stockert is busy in building 18, sorting toys, hanging clothes and hoping that this afternoon's delivery trucks bring a good measure of the articles she needs to complete her Christmas shopping.