

Scouting at Willowbrook: All it needs is time and money

By CHRISTOPHER FINAN

"I hate to take my kids out in the community in ripped uniforms," the scoutmaster said, clearly pained by the memory of many such trips.

"So I'm down on my knees—begging."

But Larry Evans' words probably sit awkwardly on the page. Without his ringing sincerity as proof, it might well seem that only the quotation marks hold them in place.

A teacher at Willowbrook Developmental Center and the leader of 80 of the 190 retarded Boy Scouts there as well as a regular troop in Brooklyn, he would hardly have time to practice the art of the good quote even if he cared to.

More usually, his talents are consumed by the struggle to convince occasionally discouraged boys to try the square knot again.

If this in itself seems pointless, we have his word for the fact that if they are sometimes disheartened, "I've never seen them so excited before...It's just remarkable how they respond."

And Larry Evans has been teaching at Willowbrook for 14 years.

Though Evans' boys are relative newcomers to scouting, there have been handicapped Scouts from the very beginning. In fact, the first national executive of the Scouts, James West, was a cripple.

But it has only been in the past several years that the scouting program has begun to enroll large numbers of both mentally and physically handicapped boys.

Since 1971, the number has grown at a rate of 15 per cent annually and now stands at

some 59,000.

To prepare for still further expansion as well as to celebrate the success of the initial program, the national executive board of the scouts has devoted February, its 66th anniversary month, to "involving the handicapped scout."

Roundtable discussions of these Scouts' special needs have been conducted in thousands of communities across the country; all scout camps were officially opened to the handicapped; plans were made for eventually providing these camps with the necessary special facilities and the first national conference on handicapped scouting in two years was scheduled for May.

On Staten Island alone there are now 14 special troops which account for nearly 300 handicapped children. There are units for the physically handicapped, the visually-impaired and the brain damaged as well as the four troops at Willowbrook which serve the mentally retarded.

Given the money and the time, Joe Brown, the volunteer coordinator of handicapped scouting here, believes the program could grow even larger. And Evans is convinced that where there are now 190 Willowbrook center Scouts, there could be as many as 400.

He said that only the lack of uniforms—those boys who have them are wearing ragged 10-year-old cast offs—and camping equipment, which very few boys have at all, are the only obstacles in the program's path.

"If we can get the things," he said, "we're going all out."

If this is in fact true, then scouting at Willowbrook has made significant progress in

the last few years. Initially at least its problems were legion.

Mrs. Elizabeth Hammond, a former director of volunteer services and the wife of former center director Dr. Jack Hammond, organized the first Willowbrook troop in 1966 with the assistance of Joe Brown and the Rotary Club.

But after several productive years, the program was become neglected when Dr. Hammond and the institution generally were engulfed by a maelstrom of controversy, Brown said. He added that all subsequent attacks on Willowbrook have had a similarly unsettling effect of the scouting program.

Another problem is that, aside from Mrs. Hammond's efforts and Evans' diligence, most of the support for the program has come from the community and not from the institution itself. It has come from men like Brown and Dick Vienes, a former scoutmaster who took his boys to Willowbrook weekly to help the Scouts there.

According to Butch Baker, assistant coordinator of volunteer services for the center, this remains a problem today. "We need people from the

community to get involved," he said.

He explained that the institution could not spend money for the scouting program since relatively few of its 2,600 residents are involved.

Even allowing for a program twice the size of the current one and throwing in the 70 Girl Scouts who belong to three troops there—or 500 Scouts in all—an enrollment of 19 per cent of the resident population would not justify the expenditure, he said.

Outside funding must be increased because a lack of funds is the single largest problem the program faces, Baker added.

But Evans thinks there is an equally important problem in the Willowbrook administration's failure to commit itself officially if not financially to the Scouts.

Under the prevailing "unitized" structure—where the community is divided into self-governing households—the decision to sponsor a troop is left to each unit leader's discretion.

Though Evans conceded that there had been more staff involvement under the new system than the old, he com-



Scoutmaster Larry Evans assists one of the members of his Boy Scout troop at the Willowbrook Developmental Center. More than 190 boys are involved in the scouting program there.

plained that he isn't getting enough cooperation from the team leaders.

After spending two weeks last summer at the Scouts' Ten-Mile River camp in upstate New York, Evans became convinced that scouting held tremendous teaching potential.

"It was beautiful. The kids are very surprising. I didn't teach them, they taught me.

"I had a couple of kids read from the Bible. They never did that before," he said.

Evans added that he wished Willowbrook administrators would take a more active interest in the scouting program. But at the very least he wants their permission to take an even larger number of boys to camp this summer.

But on the whole Brown considers Evans too critical, both of his fellow teachers and of the administration. There are few scoutmaster as good as Evans, he said; anyone else would suffer by his standards.

"I've always had the cooper-

ation when I've asked for it," he noted, adding that one of the program's biggest problems—a lack of transportation—was often alleviated by the loan of a Willowbrook bus.

Further, he said, Baker has been instrumental in facilitating the program by serving as an effective liaison between the institution and the community scouting officials.

With this type of cooperation, Steve Wells, Island scouting executive, believes the handicapped scouting program

can progress along a more definite path than it has followed in the past—not only at Willowbrook but on the Island at large.

"We kind of just hoped we could handle it earlier," he said. "Now we have the wherewithall."

Wells added that the Scouts were currently trying to organize a troop at PS 60, Graniteville.

"We are anxious to involve them all. We want to go the whole route."