

# Blind, deaf, retarded getting a chance at life

By SYDNEY FREEDBERG

At the age of 18, Roland Walters is finding a place in society.

Roland is blind, deaf and retarded. He spent 15 years on the wards of the Willowbrook State School because no one could communicate with him.

This rejection apparently took its toll on Roland, who turned to violence as a form of stimulation. To keep him from doing harm to himself and others, ward attendants were instructed to lock Roland in an armor suit. He developed the stance of an animal poised to attack his prey.

Last November, when he entered a special deaf-blind program at the "new" Staten Island Developmental Center, Roland Walters, according to program director Jo Merritt, could not laugh. He could not cry. He had no respect for himself and was incapable of love and affection.

He could not make choices because there never were choices to make. His existence had been reduced to eating and sleeping in the place the late Robert F. Kennedy described as a "snakepit."

Now, however, through the deaf-blind program, Roland's teachers are not only discovering how much they can do for Roland, but how much Roland can do for them.

By using his hands, Roland has learned to communicate and master jobs once thought beyond his capabilities. He also has been taught to recognize his friends through the senses of smell and touch.

Roland's teachers, meanwhile, have learned the virtues of warmth and patience, while discovering that Roland is not really different from other people, except that he is slower to learn.

But perhaps the most precious mes-

sage is the one being sent to outsiders, who are seeing a youth with profound disabilities — someone once cast aside as an oddity not mean for this world — emerge from years of exile and hardship.

Roland Walters was not immune to the inhumanity of the snakepit, but he did more than survive it. What seems wonderful, even wondrous, is that countless others did, too. At the institution today:

¶ Chautemoc Martinez, called Marty by his friends, is learning to walk for the first time in 18 years. Marty, like Roland, is blind, deaf and retarded, and until last November had been sentenced to a life in a wheelchair.

But according to Ms. Merritt, the "scissors deformity" of his legs, brought about largely by years of inac-



tivity, has been reversed through a rigorous course of physical therapy. And next year Ms. Merritt expects that the youth once described as "anti-social" will have mastered the bread-and-butter skills needed for life on the outside.

¶ In another program, a profoundly retarded man in his 30s watercolors portraits. When he began this work last year, program staffers recall, he consigned his subject to the indignity of a dot. In the next pictures, they say, his person looked like a rodent and then like

a falling leaf. Now, for the first time, the man paints a man with eyes, ears and a well-formed mouth.

¶ In a pre-vocational program in Building 23, a middle-aged woman learns to assemble necklaces after years of being told she could not. The woman has no fingers, only clawlike stumps. She also is blind and cannot see the colored blocks as she strings them. But her building supervisor says that despite her disabilities, the woman may soon be able to do her necklace work for pay on the outside.

¶ Arthur Dehler, once a self-declared "prisoner" of the institution who worked several years carrying urine specimens to the lab, now has a job at the center as a custodial engineer in Building 3. "I'm not bitter about the lost time," Dehler says. "I just love people and feel very fortunate to have the opportunity to live on my own."

With the help of dedicated employees and well-planned programs, the Rolands and the Marty and the others once thought to be exceptionally vulnerable are somehow mustering the will to overcome years of adversity.

But the story would not be complete without mention of the people whose lives, by no wonder, were crushed in the snakepit. Like the middle-aged man, for instance, who used to be a fighter, but doesn't complain anymore because a decade of resisting got him seclusions, beatings and drugs.

Or the old woman firm in her ways for whom the routine of sleeping-eating is not easily broken since this is the only routine she knows.

Or the younger person, whose "behaviors" are deemed so troublesome that he is "treated" with calming drugs instead of activities, and whose life just drifts, as if he were on a rudderless raft.

There are more than a few of these, too, for whom the violence, neglect, overcrowding and dehumanization of the "old" institution were enough to break their wills. And they stand now as living reminders of the past's mistakes.

**(This is the last of three articles. The Seven Wonders of Staten Island series will continue in the Sunday Advance.)**