

Lost eyes and some heart, too

By THOMAS FORBES

When Steven Masgai was 5, his mother signed him over to New York State's custody, and he was placed in the Willowbrook Developmental Center on Staten Island. His mother felt she could not cope with his mental deficiencies.

When Masgai left that institution for the mentally retarded in 1973, he took with him frightening memories of 10 years in wards where, he said, he was berated, beaten, sexually abused and forced to take sedatives.

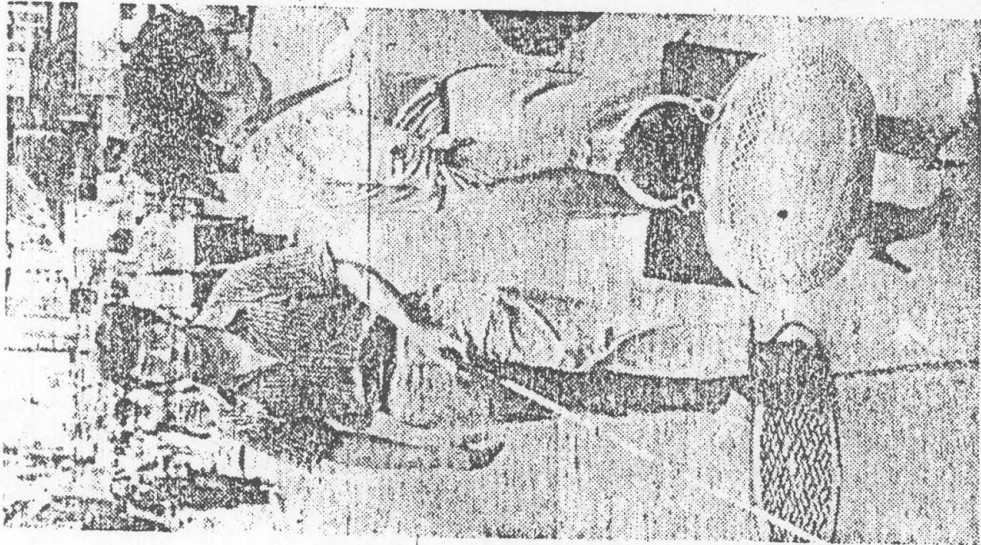
But the worst for him was eight months during 1969 when, inexplicably, he gradually went blind.

Now, after surviving Willowbrook, Masgai, 23, has to face a new tragedy. Poncho, a guide dog with which Masgai developed the closest relationship he said he has ever had, was taken from him Thursday. Poncho had bitten two people, Masgai said his German shepherd was responding to taunts from people who threw pebbles at it.

"I FELT I WANTED to kill myself because people don't have any feelings," a despondent Masgai said. To him, Poncho was more than a member of the family. "I don't know how to say this, but I used to hug him and kiss him," he said. "When they took him, I wanted them to leave on the collar I bought him so he would remember me. But they said they'd have to take the collar off."

Masgai, who lives alone in the Throgs Neck Houses in the Bronx, has been assured a new dog and a place in the next three-week training class at the school that provided Poncho. His new dog probably will be a golden retriever or Labrador.

But the next class at Guiding Eyes for the Blind is not until Sept. 26—meaning a month of waiting, which Masgai says will be tantamount to being in prison.



MEL FINKELSTEIN DAILY NEWS

Steven Masgai finds making his way is difficult without his guide dog.