

Books of The Times

# Hope for the Retarded

By CHRISTOPHER LEHMANN-HAUPT

**THE WILLOWBROOK WARS: A Decade of Struggle for Social Change.** By David J. Rothman and Sheila M. Rothman. 405 pages. Harper & Row. \$27.95.

The dramatic title of "The Willowbrook Wars" attracts deserved attention to the extraordinary book that David J. Rothman and Sheila M. Rothman have written about the decade-long legal struggle to close down Willowbrook State School, the notorious Staten Island institution for retarded children and adults. But the title isn't strictly accurate. If I may use its shortcomings to praise what happens to be a very good book, let me count the ways the words "Willowbrook Wars" misrepresent what the Rothmans have actually achieved with their project.

First, the title exaggerates what really happened. No bullets were fired; no people were intentionally killed; no ultimate victory was won. The major weapons used in the struggle were not instruments of destruction. They were the television cameras that the reporter Geraldo Rivera

focused on Willowbrook in 1972 to reveal what he saw as "concentration-camp"-like conditions under which many of its 5,400 inmates were living. They were the therapeutic concept of "normalization" — or the notion evolved in the 1960's that retarded people did better in the mainstream of society than in institutions — as well as a new legal strategy, also developed in the 1960's, that found judicial supervision to be an effective instrument of civil-rights reform.

They were the class-action suit filed in March 1972 for the Willowbrook inmates and the consent decree, granted three years later, that ordered Willowbrook closed down. And after that, the weapons were the love, the vision and the energy that led to the partial success of the experiment in deinstitutionalizing Willowbrook's inmates, and the bureaucratic and legislative reaction that ultimately led to the overturn of the consent decree. But nobody was shot, and no side demanded total surrender.

Second, the title "The Willowbrook Wars" misrepresents the authors' roles. They are not correspondents reporting inherently tragic events and representing one or the other side in a deadly confrontation. True, they are social scientists with deep interests in the so-called helping professions — Mr. Rothman teaches social medicine and history at Columbia's College of Physicians and Surgeons, and is the author of such notable books as "The Discovery of the Asylum" and "Doing Good: The Limits of Benevolence," among others; Mrs. Rothman is Research Scholar at the Center for the Social Sciences of Columbia University, and wrote "Woman's Proper Place: A History of Changing Ideals and Practices, 1870 to the Present."

As observers interested in progressive therapeutic causes, they show an occasional bias toward the plaintiffs in the case — the people who worked to close down Willowbrook — and against the bureaucratic forces that resisted them. But they do not crow at victories or despair over defeats. At the end they draw balanced and subtle conclusions that shed light on the many ambiguities of an extremely complicated matter. Far from endorsing any side's position, they even concede "the ad hoc and idiosyncratic manner" in which "reform

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through litigation determines the allocation of social resources."

Finally, the metaphor of their title is out of sync with a reader's reaction to the book. One doesn't come away filled with revulsion and sorrow. Certainly the recalcitrance of bureaucracy is deplorable, but that isn't exactly news. What's news — and inspiring news at that — is that institutions such as Willowbrook may indeed not be necessary. The experiment in normalization really worked when it was conscientiously implemented. Once houses were found, community resistance overcome, the right mix of therapists and patients set up, and a truly responsive environment created, even severely retarded people thrived beyond the expectations of normalization theory. Which is exactly what common sense would indicate, but what public program ever responded to common sense?

More encouraging still are the implications seen by the Rothmans for other fields of human services. "If responsible caretakers can be found to serve the profoundly retarded," their book concludes, "they can be found for the aged — if we look for them and compensate them." And: "What holds true for the elderly holds true as well for the homeless. They may make greater demands upon services, and on public space, but after Willowbrook we have a better sense of the feasibility of alternatives to neglect on park benches or indiscriminate confinement in state armories."

These are not the kind of conclusions one brings home from a battlefield. So don't think of this book as an account of warfare. It doesn't even need its melodramatic title; it's exciting enough to read as a legal drama. Think of the book as just plain "Willowbrook," and read it not to see who won or lost, but to learn how a profoundly important social-policy game was played.



Jeanne Trudeau

Sheila M. Rothman and David J. Rothman.