

# Where Mentally Retarded Children Are Raised A Special Home For Special Kids

STORY: Tim Richard, Sunday Editor  
PICTURES: James Hubbard, Chief Photographer

The buildings look like any suburban elementary school—bright, airy, cheerful. The only marked difference seems to be the unimposing fence around the play area.

The women taking care of the children might be ordinary teachers, although perhaps their dress is a bit more casual than the average teacher's.

They take care of the mentally retarded at the Plymouth State Home and Training School, and they underline the word "home."

"The kids associate white uniforms with doctors and people who give shots. They don't like them. So we haven't encouraged the staff to wear uniforms," explains one official.

Only the volunteers wear uniforms, "candy-stripe" in color. It's the kind of outfit you'd associate with a singing lady on a kids' morning TV show or with a woman

helping Santa Claus in the department store.

**THE INSTITUTION**— "junior grade campus" might be the better term—covers 250 acres along Five Mile Road and straddling Sheldon Road in western Wayne County.

It's the home of some 1,200 children who have sub-average intellectual functioning. They're not mentally ill or diseased; rather they have impairments of the intellect caused at or near birth. Much can be done to help them, but there's no known "cure." About half have a physical handicap, too.

Established first in 1958 in Farmington, the home was moved to new quarters at the Five Mile-Sheldon site in 1960. Its ultimate capacity will be 1,800 to 2,500 beds.

Its 800 employees—452 of them in direct patient care—are paid \$5.2 million of state Mental Health Department funds. Total budget, counting food and supplies, is \$6 million

annually.

**BUT THE STATE** of Michigan is just about the last thing you're conscious of when you visit.

In the lobby are pamphlets from the Michigan Association for Retarded Children.

The "candy-stripers" are the auxiliary workers, many of whom bring specialized skills to their volunteer work. The library, for example, is one of the best in the state on the subject of the retarded; it was begun by a volunteer.

"The volunteer program was begun in 1961, and it was the first in the state," says George Ebling, administrative assistant to the superintendent. Because the home and the staff were new at that time, volunteers were more readily accepted and utilized than they might have been in an older institution more set in its ways.

Besides aiding the staff and delighting the children, the auxiliary fills another vital need. In case of emergency—severe winter weather or riots—the auxiliary, composed of many suburbanites, can be alerted to fill in

for regular staffers who can't get to work.

There's also a teen volunteer group. Operating mainly in the evenings and in summer, it's open to youngsters age 14 and up.

A Parents Association raises \$15,000 to \$20,000 a year to buy things for the home and takes stands on pending legislation, just like any PTA. The parents association movement goes back to the early 1950s.

The volunteer program and contacts with the community are under the direction of William Boyd, who heads the community relations office.

**THE POLICY** of being home-like goes far beyond the architecture and the informal dress.

"We're looking at our institution as a flexible facility, working in conjunction with community facilities . . . not with the idea of keeping a youngster here the rest of his life," says Ebling.

"Our objective is not to have to build any more institutions, but to develop community facilities for the mentally retarded," he adds.

About 15 per cent of the patients live in the community. One problem, says Ebling, is that the state home's staff is too small to find many family care homes; federal funds are being sought to improve this service.

Another method is the expansion of day care centers throughout the state, a plan that allows the retarded to attend some kind of program in the community but to sleep at home.

A third method of taking care of the mildly afflicted or borderline cases has been public schools' special education programs.

"Twenty years ago, a lot of these youngsters came to institutions. They needed a school program that wasn't available in the community. You don't see that type of kid in an institution any more," Ebling explains:

**THE DESIRE** to keep more children in, or return them to, the community is not only a matter of good treatment but a matter of necessity.

Many retarded children are susceptible to respiratory and secondary infections. In years past, these died at birth or didn't live long. Antibiotics and improvements in medical care are keeping more of them alive. Thus, the state homes must increasingly be devoted to these more difficult cases.

The Plymouth State Home and Training School is, however, more than a pretty place where the patients stay. They're trained to take care of themselves and, where possible, to do socially useful tasks.

In the Anne Sullivan Building, named for Helen Keller's teacher, is a specialized program for the blind. In another building is a program for the motor-handicapped. In still another, there is vocational training—homemaking, woodshop, simple mechanical skills.

(When the retarded do find jobs, says the President's Committee on Employment of the Handicapped, they have a number of strong points: They have a desire to make good; they don't job-hop; they usually have better-than-average attendance records, and they'll stick to routine tasks.)

But life isn't all care and training. There's lots of chance for fun: group camp in Kensington Park during the summer; tickets to the circus, toys. A recreation building with a gym and facilities for bowling will be started this year.

In the cold black-and-white of a budget, it may be an institution. To the kids who live there, it's home.

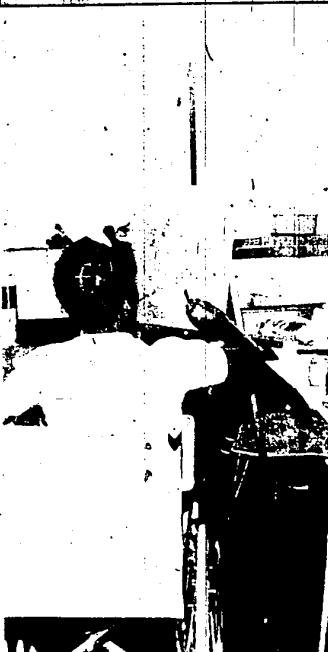
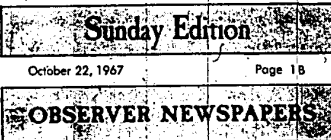


THE DINING ROOM is like any ordinary room where kids eat—noisy.



PSYCHOLOGIST Bob Trenez administers an infant intelligence test with wooden blocks.

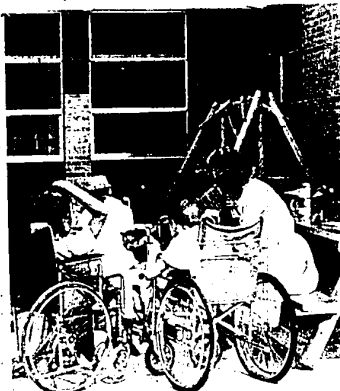
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ART CLASSES last 45 minutes, but the kids wish they were longer; many of their works decorate the home.



HANDICAPPED BOY can stand and put some weight on his legs in this special compartment, part of the sandbox.



ABOUT HALF of the children have some sort of physical handicap, but they still have a lot of fun at outdoor games.