

Mom Is Worthy Opponent for State

By LAWRIE MIFFLIN

Being the parent of a retarded child is difficult in any case, but for Mrs. Willie Mae Goodman the difficulties are compounded. Mrs. Goodman, a divorcee who lives alone in an East Harlem housing project, has one child—a severely retarded 18-year-old girl—and she fears that the state wants to move her daughter to an inferior institution.

Her daughter, Margaret, and 174 others are patients at Gouverneur State School at 621 Water St. in lower Manhattan. They were moved from Willowbrook State School 12 years ago, and since then Mrs. Goodman has been leading a parent and community crusade to keep the children from being moved again.

Positive Treatment

In the process, she has not only kept Gouverneur open three different times in the face of state efforts to close it, but she has helped to make treatment at Gouverneur more positive.

It isn't easy to be optimistic about the children at Gouverneur. They are the most severely retarded and brain damaged. Of 175, only a handful can walk—or talk. Many professionals feel that there is little that can be done for such people except to give them custodial care.

But Mrs. Goodman vehemently disagrees, and that's one of the reasons she has fought to keep Gouverneur intact.

"We have a wonderful staff here, and we've learned there is no child that doesn't respond to the touch of love," she said. "We would like to see more training programs for them, at earlier stages. Two years ago we fought for speech and hearing therapy, for a social worker, for more trained nurses, and we got them. But the trouble is, it's always a fight, because the state just



News photo by Evelyn Straus
Mrs. Willie Mae Goodman visits her daughter in Gouverneur State School. Visiting rights in ward is one result of her efforts.

wants to give up on this type of child."

Mrs. Goodman, a small, very thin woman who looks younger

than her 43 years, founded the Gouverneur Parents Association to wage what she regards as a never-ending battle to keep the

State Department of Mental Hygiene from closing Gouverneur. Three times it has tried to do so, and three times it has had to back down.

"There years ago, it was a budget cut they said forced them to close it," she recalls. "Then they said it was overcrowded, but we said, 'So are all the others.' And then this summer they said the building was no good, that it had fire violations. Well, that's because they don't maintain it. They want to be rid of it."

Dr. Stuart Keill, regional director of the Department of Mental Hygiene, denies there is a plan to close Gouverneur permanently.

"The plan this summer was to move the children, only temporarily, while we repaired the building," he said. "Mrs. Goodman has had experiences with the department that make her distrust all of us, but I'm trying to show her that we are as concerned about the children as she is. And her complaining is good—she keeps us on our toes and she keeps the staff and parents inspired."

Keill said that fire hazards at Gouverneur are being corrected, and he has ordered a complete structural study of the building, aimed at helping the department decide whether it would be better to renovate Gouverneur for permanent use, or build a new center for the retarded on the lower East Side.

Parents Should Visit

Another of Mrs. Goodman's victories was the right for parents to visit their children on the wards, seeing other children and getting to know the staff and other parents. Until three years ago, they had to see their children in waiting rooms.

"We wish more parents of retarded kids could visit here," Mrs. Goodman said. Gouverneur could be a model for other schools, she added. Parents "need education, to see that all places aren't like Willowbrook, and to see how much a retarded child can offer. Many who were only vegetables, and expected to die when they were moved here 12 years ago, are now responding, even improving. And a mother's touch can do wonders."

When Mrs. Goodman walks along the wards at Gouverneur, she proves that the most severely retarded still respond to affection. Even those who can do nothing all day but lie in a crib, their twisted limbs and atrophied muscles useless, recognize "Goody," smile at her and try to talk to her or hug her.