

The Tuskegee News

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Never 'disposable things' again

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“Rows upon rows of numbered, small, rusted markers as far as the eye can see. No names, just numbers. It must be the most gruesome sight...Unknown humans, shunned when living, deprived of their very names in death – and known only to God.”

—Joe Ingram*

There was the erie wail of the bagpipes; later a solemn brass tone from a bugle playing taps.

A minister prayed with fervor to begin and end the service. It was a proper funeral for the more than 5,000 dead who did not receive the respect which a proper funeral service affords.

It sent shivers down my spine. How could it be that the remains of 5,000 people could have gone to their graves without remembrance and respect? Was it only God who had time and respect and love for these precious souls?

These souls were housed in bodies of those we labeled as mentally ill, or, in the early days, the insane, and the imbeciles — words which are today as offensive as the "N" word. We now are trying to make things right in the way we view those with mental illness, the retarded, the homeless, those who are less fortunate than we. Making that transition is an interesting, sometimes painful, journey

The chapel at Bryce Hospital was filled last Sunday, standing room only. The relatively new structure is named the Bryant-Jordan Chapel. We had to get our two most famous football coaches to lend their name to the fund-raising effort to build the chapel.

It was a surreal afternoon. For a century and a half, tens of thousands of people had been shipped to Alabama's State Hospital for the Insane, now named Bryce to honor its first superintendent Peter Bryce.

The place literally drips with irony. In its first years it was a model for the nation, designed by a great architect and operated in a pastoral setting by Dr. Bryce. He didn't allow abuse, neglect, chains, or straitjackets. Early on, the rooms looked like those in a hotel. Rockers, dressers, and beds with clean, crisp sheets. All able-bodied patients worked. There were gardens, and fields of corn, hundreds of cattle, horses, a piggery, and a giant laundry.

Women gathered each day in large sewing rooms which looked like modern factories of the time. The women made the uniforms, sheets, and blankets. Others prepared, cooked, and served the food in pretty

dining rooms.

The hospital was almost self-supporting. Dr. Bryce gave his life to the institution. Too many others just gave their lives. They came in the front door and left by the back into one of several cemeteries. I have walked those halls with several governors. George Wallace was indifferent. Mental patients didn't vote. Gov Lurleen Wallace wept. Gov. Riley proclaimed "enough is enough. We're going to build a new world class hospital."

Too many families never acknowledged they had a "crazy" member. Even in death, they chose to look in another direction as their dead were buried. At first, wooden stakes marked the burial places. The stakes had numbers, not names. Then there were small iron markers shaped much like a clover leaf. They, too, had only numbers.

I walked through these graveyards many times and tried to mentally place names and faces on those gravesites where men and women, black and white, military men from all branches of services, even a section for the babies born of female patients, were buried – all without names.

People often call Steve Davis, historian at Bryce, to ask about the gravesite of a family member, acknowledging for the first time that they had a "defective" family member. "They come to the hospital and I take them to the cemetery and they often grow angry when I can't show them the burial site. We simply don't know."

Davis has a huge ledger book, tattered and yellowed with age, with a listing of all the burials with the only designation of some a number. Through cross-referencing, sometime a name can be placed with the number, but with all the markers gone, finding a burial site is impossible.

When I leaf through that ledger and see all the numbers, I'm always reminded of Auschwitz, Buchenwald, and Dachau where Hitler sought to murder all the world's Jews. He numbered and labeled them and hauled them to death camps in cattle cars. Such an analogy with the Bryce situation is not fair. Our state was not guilty of mass murder, just mass indifference, and mass neglect.

I sat in the auditorium behind Ricky Wyatt and his caretaker aunt. Wyatt is the former Bryce patient in whose name the federal lawsuit against the state of Alabama was filed. He's a tall man, heavy man. He walks with a cane. When he was acknowledged at the memorial, he struggled to get to his feet, and extended his hand to help his elderly aunt to hers. He slowly turned back toward the audience to look into the eyes of those giving him a standing ovation.

He was one of the lucky ones. He made it out of Bryce alive. I was with him in Federal Judge Frank Johnson's courtroom when the suit was filed. I was there with him more than 30 years later when federal oversight of Alabama's mental facilities was removed.

We're making progress, slow progress. The Bryce property has been sold to the University of Alabama for its expansion. But it's most historic buildings will be saved and its cemeteries will be preserved — forever.

Let's remember and revere the dead. People must never again become disposable "things." We must never ever again bury both body and soul wrapped in a sheet, no coffin, no name, and no respect with their last contact with the State of Alabama being a shovel of dirt thrown in their face.

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