



RICKY WYATT

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But Ricky Wyatt is much more than an icon; he is a person who has struggled with a life of misfortune and poverty. He still cares deeply for all those whose

married a Miss Brent, whose family founded the nearby West Alabama community of the same name. Her husband came to work at Bryce in 1927.

“It’s really just a family tradition,” Wyatt concluded. “I have more memories of family members coming here to pick up paychecks than I do of my time here as a patient. My mom played here and I did, too. What she liked to do and what we all liked to do was slide down the big banister inside the main building.”

Born in Tuscaloosa

Ricky Wyatt began his life as an infant in Tuscaloosa in 1954.

“I was delivered by Dr. Partlow,” he said. “He delivered me, he delivered our family. My cousin in fact was the first baby ever born in what was then the new Druid City Hospital.”

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lives were intertwined with the history of Bryce Hospital, including dozens of his own family members.

“Besides my mom and me, I have had 56 members of my immediate family who have worked here at Bryce between 1927 and 1982,” Wyatt said. “Many of them were very close to me. My grandmother retired as the dietician of the Women’s Receiving Building. My Aunt Mildred, who was also my guardian and who helped me file the lawsuit, was a nurse’s aide. My cousin Jackie worked in the psychiatric department. Way back when, my great-great grandfather even made ice out here in the first ice house they ever had. A dozen of my aunts worked as nurses or aides or in food services. It’s like my whole family history is tied up here. I just never knew how tied up I myself would become with this place.”

Wyatt said his family roots run deep in the area. His great-great grandfather

Wyatt grew up with his great-grandmother in what was the start of a life tougher than most people can even imagine.

“My mom was unable to take care of me because she got in trouble. We have always been close and we still are, but she just couldn’t be here for me when I was young. When my great-grandmother got too old to care for me I was taken in by my aunt, Mildred Rawlins.”

Aunt Mildred of course was a Bryce employee so that was where Ricky often played as a boy. But trouble was never far away.

A series of stops

“I got in trouble and got sent away to the Industrial School in Birmingham,” Wyatt recalled. “Eventually they sent me back to Tuscaloosa but I stayed in trouble and got sent away again. Nothing real bad, I was just a hell-raiser like a lot

of young boys. I mean, I broke some windows or something. But anyway I got sent to the Methodist Children's Home in Selma."

In Selma Ricky was rapidly growing into the tall, strong frame he carries as a man. He was an outstanding athlete. He remembers especially being mentored by local high school boys from nearby Parrish High. One such mentor was Jay Casey, who went on to play football at Auburn University under Ralph "Shug" Jordan, another Selma native.

"I was good at sports, especially basketball. I could get in there and play with those older boys. That Methodist Home was a great place, looking back on it. I just didn't realize it at the time. Unfortunately, I kept getting in trouble and they decided to let the state take me so I came back to Tuscaloosa. My Aunt Mildred already had her hands full so she decided the best thing she could do was to put me into Bryce."

Ricky met with his Selma probation officer, a Mr. Upchurch, and two hours later, as he recalls it, he was committed. One of what now amounted to over

5,000 patients in the aging and overcrowded facility, Ricky was just 14 years old.

The back ward employees were often very cruel and callous, Wyatt said.

"The nurses and aides and sometimes even the supervisors would make people fight so they could bet on the winners. Or they might just lock us all up so they could have a good card game without being disturbed. To get us up in the morning they might come in there and poke us with a broom, or throw hot water on us. Of course to me the worst thing was that I knew there was nothing wrong with me. They couldn't tell; they just assumed I was sick. But I knew."

Life in the institution

"I was the youngest person in there by far," he said. "I'd say the next person was maybe ten years older than I was. I never had a diagnosis or anything. I didn't have mental illness. I was even a pretty good student. I was just a little wild and didn't have much supervision."

"I didn't like it, but it wasn't a totally new environment," Wyatt remembered. "I mean, I'd been around here all my life and my family was still all around. But that first night in there with all those people I was scared to death. After a couple of weeks it got better and I wasn't so scared."

Wyatt was put on Ward 19, which he said was bad, but he said patients on other wards were even worse.

"A lot of the people there were very sick, very delusional," he said. "They didn't know who they were and they weren't getting any care. They were basically being fed and medicated. That's about it."

Wyatt was soon started on a regimen of Thorazine.

"They just did it because it was simple and easy," he said. "That was the easiest way to take care of all those people, just zone them out on meds. But I was really young and I didn't even have a diagnosis.

I knew what was happening and I at least had my family around. They would come see me and I always said the same thing to every one of them: 'Get me out of here!'"

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Aunt Mildred intervenes

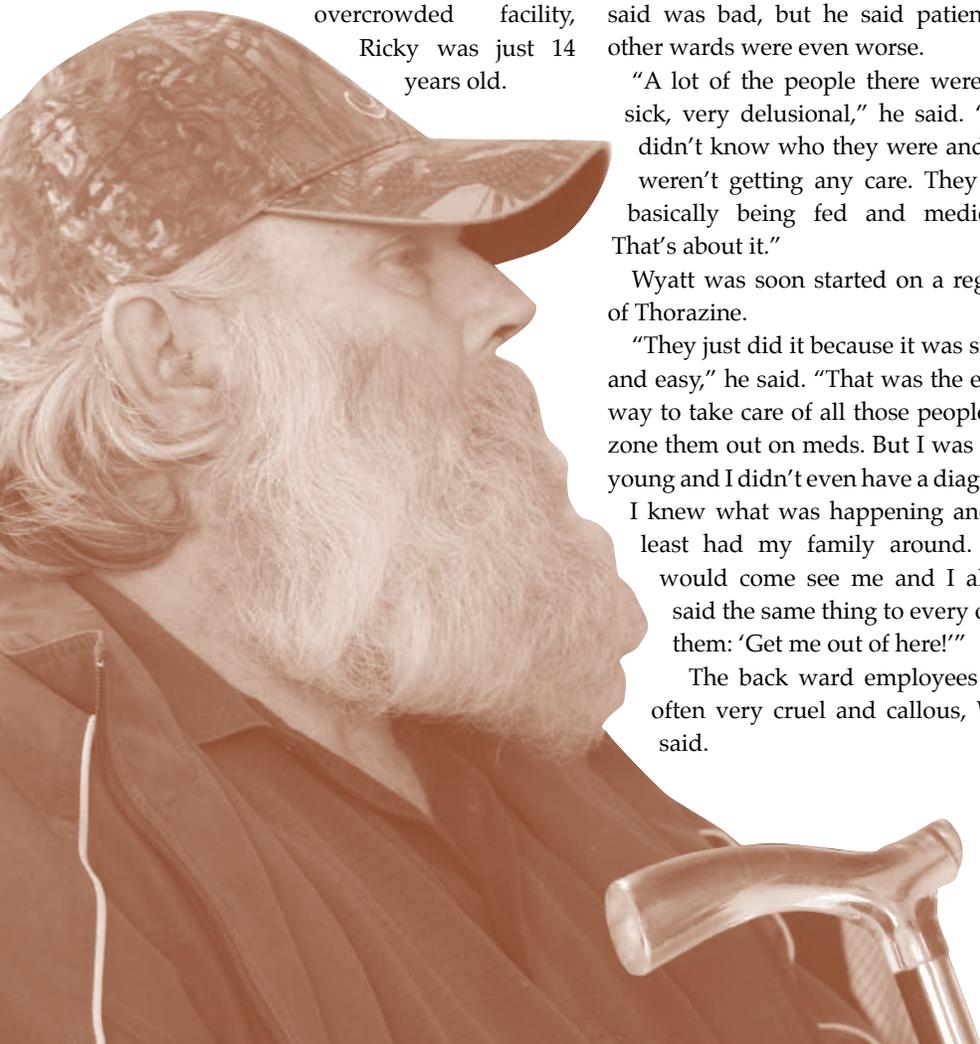
Fortunately for the young boy, Wyatt's Aunt Mildred, who had been transferred to the geriatric unit, managed to come see him one night and he made his usual plea for her to get him off the ward. Mildred had her daughter, Ricky's cousin Jackie, come over later with a Dr. Walpole. Wyatt told Dr. Walpole what was happening back there.

"I told him I had no reason to lie to him," Wyatt said. "He just told me to try and remember what all was going on back here and he would see what he could do."

About a month later Wyatt was summoned to Dr. Walpole's office where he was met by the doctor, a lawyer, and his cousin Jackie.

"My cousin asked Dr. Walpole if the lawyer was competent and smart and he told us he was. The lawyer then asked me if I knew what I was doing to file such a complaint that could lead to a large lawsuit. And I told him I did know what I was doing. That was the end of that as far as I knew, but as a result I got moved into the Token Economy Ward, where you were rewarded with tokens for good behavior."

Wyatt's old Selma friend and mentor Mr. Upchurch came back into the picture



and told the Bryce custodians that Ricky was supposed to be getting an education.

"They said OK, although I never saw the inside of a school," he said. "But what I did see was a new counselor who took over my case. What he said to me was that if I ever wanted to back out to just let him know."

Wyatt said he never seriously considered backing down from what he started.

"I had a genuine feeling that these people, these patients who were basically helpless, were tortured in their minds and they still had to put up with these horrible conditions. I didn't know of course that it would turn into such a big thing. I just wanted relief for myself and for all these people I saw who needed relief."

From Back Ward to Open Ward

In time, Wyatt graduated from the Token Ward and moved onto the Open Ward. He got his GED at age 16 – "the youngest ever," he said – and then went into rehab.

"My aunt said they moved me to the Open Ward to kind of bribe me, to make me back off the lawsuit," he said. "I don't know if that's true or not. But I could now come and go as I pleased. I walked to rehab everyday, which lasted from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m., and then went to a halfway house for another six months. I wanted to go to mechanic school and they wanted me to become a janitor so I just said forget it. For that I got sent back to Bryce."

Back at Bryce, Wyatt said a lot of his relatives began to fear for their jobs. Ricky moved onto a drug and alcohol ward because a cousin worked there. He went through the program even though he didn't drink or use drugs.

"I focused really on a kind of anger management," he said. "After that I went back to rehab in Montgomery. That place was nice. To me it seemed like a resort."

Wyatt got along well there and took a series of jobs in Montgomery, mostly as a desk clerk in various motels. For a while, he said, he ran off with a girl from Opp who was also on rehab assignment from Bryce, but when they split up he went back to Tuscaloosa.

He has lived privately since then, mostly near Tuscaloosa or Birmingham, but out of the state system and out of Bryce altogether. He has maintained a close work-

ing relationship with ADAP attorney James Tucker, who has worked with him in recent years in the long settlement of the landmark case known throughout the world as *Wyatt v. Stickney*.

Why preservation matters

"Bryce Hospital and the preservation of its grounds and buildings are important to me," Wyatt said. "This has all been a big part of my life. I grew up here. It hasn't all been good. Being a patient here certainly wasn't. But it's my family heritage. It's part of who I am."

Wyatt has never wanted recognition for his association with the lawsuit that changed the face of mental health treatment in America, and he doesn't want any results of the preservation effort to be associated with his name.

"This is about the patients I was here with and who were here before me," he said. "I want Bryce preserved and remembered for the patients who spent their lives here and all the people who worked their whole lives and retired here. The time that I was in here I didn't care a thing about preserving that history.

I didn't think of things like that back then. But in the last five or six years I've gotten interested. I told Dr. Hobbs (chairman of the Historical Preservation Committee) that anything I could do I would. I told him to use me or my name in any way that would help the preservation effort."

Wyatt is realistic about the financial challenge the committee faces.

"I'd like to see the whole place kept and restored, but I know that would be tough. I hope we can at least have the main building taken care of. Also, the mansion and entrance and Dr. Bryce's grave."

"Mr. Tucker said they are going to build a new Bryce Hospital. That's good. It needs to be good. But if we build a museum don't let it look like a fancy spa. Show the different treatments that have been used, good and bad. Show how the patients really lived in the tough times. And they were tough. But show the good side, too. The people who worked hard and tried to do good. There are lots of them. And let's always remember this as a place where little girls got to slide down the banister."



Mrs. Ilouise Hill used to slide down the banisters