

The Gadsden Times

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Campaign raises funds to honor past Bryce patients

By MARK HUGHES COBB *The Tuscaloosa News*
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Nameless and invisible: Many preferred Bryce Hospital patients remain that way.

Grave markers for the more than 5,000 buried there, wooden stakes and small iron markers shaped like cloverleaves frequently have been stolen or vandalized. Other markers have become almost hidden under weeds or dirt.

But the disregard is being addressed by markers for the four graveyards on the grounds, dedicated back in April, and by plans for a memorial garden undertaken by the Bryce Hospital Historic Preservation Committee.

Some seem to believe these sad stories are best kept buried, said committee member Camille Elebash.

"A lot of people are just not interested in having any observance for these poor souls," she said.

A fundraising campaign seeks to raise \$100,000 to complete the garden, designed by architect Evans Fitts. Since April they've brought in \$23,000. Corporate and foundation donors are being sought, as are individual donors, because the plan is to dedicate the garden in April 2011, the hospital's 150th anniversary.

"When you're out there, they only seem to exist as nameless reminders of our collective disrespect for these people," said Dr. Tom Hobbs, executive director of Western Mental Health Center, in Birmingham, and chair of the committee.

"You get the feeling these people didn't matter, and even worse, that they didn't exist. But they did, and by their existence, they paved the way to a better understanding of mental illness for all of us."

When the Alabama State Hospital for the Insane was built 150 years ago - it opened in April 1861 - it provided the finest care of its time. The first superintendent, Peter Bryce, instituted rigorous discipline, and insisted on courtesy, kindness and respect, values missing in other mental health facilities.

"Before Bryce, people were being brutalized," Hobbs said.

Generations of Bryce patients "paved the way for us to understand mental illness," Elebash said. "But the hospital went kind of downhill through the years, and the people who died there were given short shrift."

More than a century after its founding, Bryce birthed another leap forward in mental health care, though in less noble fashion.

By 1970, the patient population had exploded to 5,200, while funding had dried up. Many employees got laid off, and standards left with them. A Montgomery Advertiser editorial compared conditions at Bryce to a concentration camp.

Then in October of that year, a class-action lawsuit was filed on behalf of Ricky

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Wyatt, a 15-year-old labeled as a juvenile delinquent and housed at Bryce despite not being diagnosed mentally ill.

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His aunt, W.C. Rawlins, was one of the laid-off employees.

Together they testified about poor conditions and inhumane treatments; court rulings led to federal criteria for mental health care, known as the Wyatt Standards.

"And it all started right there at Bryce Hospital," Hobbs said.

Still, the fear and ridicule attached to mental illness led to widespread neglect and disrespect of the site. Elebash has heard horror stories.

"The university police went to a frat house to break up a loud party and found just a stack of those markers there," she said. "It's just been a terrible situation.

"It's because of the stigma of mental illness, which is just ridiculous, but there it is."

The numbers on the grave markers refer to a master list kept at the hospital, but because some of them were moved when River Road (now Jack Warner Parkway) was built in the 1970s, splitting the largest of the four cemeteries in half, exactly who's where became a mystery. But the memorial garden will be planted at what is believed to be the site of infant burials, on a knoll overlooking Jack Warner Parkway.

"There's a checkerboard-looking place for babies that were born and died at Bryce," Hobbs said. "It's overgrown, it looks like a dirt pile. There's an old rusted, corrugated piece of tin that acts like a kind of border. The whole place looks terrible."

Fitts, who donated his work, built on concepts created by Bryce consumers.

"It's really kind of two memorials there," he said, referring to the cleanup planned for the infant graveyard, and the main project in the foreground, centered by a triangular-shaped monolith.

To either side of the monolith are planned 10-foot columns and a shorter pedestal, each topped by reproductions of the cloverleaf grave markers. Surrounding that would be a paved plaza with seating areas.

Patrons can be part of that plaza, Hobbs said, by donating an inscribed memorial brick, or an honorary brick, paying tribute to a living individual. Donations are coming in now in amounts from \$15 to \$5,000, and they all are crucial, he said.

"If you can't donate, just spread the word," he said.