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EDITORIAL: Bryce memorial is a worthy project

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They lived in our community and one of Tuscaloosa County's major economic engines revolved around them. They were largely unseen and few wanted to see them. And when they died little was left to remind the world of who they were.

The patients who were buried at the cemeteries at Bryce Hospital are often forgotten. They were sent here because they could not cope with life or their families could not cope with their lives. Some died after spending many years on the hospital campus.

The final resting place of their remains is a testament to the stigma they bore. Their grave markers are small iron cloverleaves bearing a number. That number corresponds to a name in a book. That name once belonged to a living, breathing person.

Their graves don't bear names like the graves of most people because at one time, mental illness was considered shameful. It is a stigma that rises from a lack of understanding. It comes from a time when terms like "lunatic" or "imbecile" were used by clinicians as well as cruder members of the public.

The location of some who were buried in the Bryce cemeteries is no longer known. Some graves were lost to road construction. Some graves were lost to neglect.

Some members of this community have always viewed Bryce patients with caring and compassion. Operation Santa Claus saw that patients in the state mental hospital weren't forgotten at Christmas. Volunteers worked to see that the program was successful.

A local group now wants to remember the patients who drew their last breaths in our county. The Bryce Hospital Historic Preservation Committee wants to build a memorial garden in their honor. The location selected is the site where babies who were born and died at Bryce are buried.

The location conjures up a stark image, innocents entering and departing the world in a place where most experienced difficulty. It is a fitting place to express compassion for those who lived and died in that world.

The committee hopes to raise \$100,000 to build a paved plaza with seating. It is a difficult time to raise money for any cause, much less one that memorializes people who are largely nameless and forgotten.

But that is the very reason organizers hope to create a memorial in their honor. They want it to be a testament to the changes they, as patients of Bryce Hospital, brought to the mental health field.

Bryce was once among the nation's most innovative facilities for treating people with mental illnesses. It became one of the worst examples of warehousing society's unwanted members. And when conditions became bad enough, it was the catalyst for change.



The proposed memorial could be a place for relatives to reflect on the lives of lost loved ones. Perhaps we could all gain by reflecting on the lives of those who lived and died at Bryce Hospital.

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