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The fight for rights for mental health patients in Alabama

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By Honora Gathings [CONNECT](#)

TUSCALOOSA -AL - Mention the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's, and images from Birmingham of dogs, hoses and bombings may come to mind. But Alabama was also at the center of another struggle. This one involved an overcrowded, under-funded hospital for people with mental illness.

Mental health treatment has changed over the last few decades. No longer are people with mental illness sent off and institutionalized for life. Most people in Alabama go to one of 26 community treatment centers.

A 1971 lawsuit sparked the changes nationwide. The man who fought for patients' civil rights lived in Alabama.

Bryce Hospital was supposed to be a model for mental healthcare. But according to the Bryce Hospital Preservation Project, two former superintendents referred to it and other state mental hospitals as "dumping grounds." By the 1960's, more than five thousand patients were institutionalized. The state built it for 250. Many spent their lives there and remain in unmarked graves. The stories of neglect circulated.

"When I got on campus, I was extremely frightened. I was afraid of everybody. I didn't understand mental illness," said Sheila Penn, medical director of Bryce Hospital.

By the time Penn arrived at Bryce as a nurse, a former patient was already fighting the system in court. The lawsuit lead to federal mandates creating a standard of care and patient rights. Patients became decision makers.

"We don't believe in housing patients," said Penn.

Penn took us through the new 268 bed hospital, which opened this summer on the old Partlow campus. It includes a statue, fountains and stain glass from the old hospital near the University of Alabama. The area dubbed "Bryce Town" reflects the shift in care with a church, barber shop, clothing store, bank and post office.

"We have services here in Bryce Town that mimic the community. We want the patients to come in and feel like they are part of a community," said Penn.

She says around 18 people attended church on the old campus. That number has grown to around 70. In fact, Penn says some people don't want to leave.

The treatment plan often includes medication, therapy and even life skills taught in a studio apartment. Right now, patients are planning to cook their own Thanksgiving meal. Penn says the idea is to take some of the stress out of moving back home.

The state estimates 98 percent of people with mental illness are living independently and treated at community mental health centers.

Former state mental health director Dr. Timothy Stone helped with the transition. He now treats patients at the Chilton- Shelby Mental Health Center.

"We try to handle it in the context of their lives, so we don't have to disrupt everything. They just need support. They just need help," he said.

But Stone admits mental illness diagnosis can be difficult.

"You get five psychiatrists in a room to see a patient, you could get five different diagnosis. It's not an exact thing," said Stone.

Stone says treatment takes a holistic approach that cares for the person, not the exact diagnosis. He is a firm believer of a patient's right to make his or her own decision.

"Sometimes folks just won't take their meds. We live in a free society. People can choose not to take their meds," said Stone.

Some of those people end up in a hospital, like Bryce, to recover. Like any other recovery, it's a progression from the past to the present to the future. This journey enables patients to recover and live their own lives.

"It's a continuum. Just because you come to Bryce, the community has to remain involved," said Penn.

The warning signs of a mental illness can vary. But Stone says to seek help immediately if you hear voices or have suicidal thoughts. He says some people may also have trouble sleeping, problems getting out of bed, and show no interest or joy in things that used to make them happy. Primary care doctors can even help.

To find a community mental health center in your neighborhood, call 1-800-367-0955. The Alabama Department of Mental Health can refer you to one. The department can also help with substance abuse and intellectual disabilities.

To learn more about the history of Bryce and the Bryce Preservation Project, click [here](#).

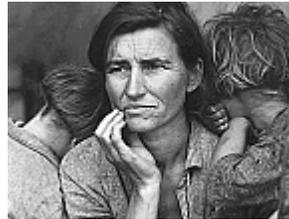
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