

Don't Trivialize Sunland Training Center's History as a Fun Ghost

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By Donato (Danny) Pietrodangelo

The first time I visited Sunland Tallahassee was in 1977.

I was a young, enthusiastic public information officer with the State of Florida, responsible for press contact in the Tallahassee district, which included Sunland and four other state institutions.

My tour began on a top floor. It was filled with cage-like metal cribs. The staff person brought us to one specific – to help us appreciate the challenges of her job – and, no doubt, for the shock value.

Inside, was an infant whose brain was outside of his skull, a condition called exencephaly. He would die soon. It was a mind-jarring introduction to the facility.

Next, a lower floor. It stunk of urine. Several men sat in wheel chairs, staring out the windows, dripping. Closely spaced beds were occupied by people with multiple disabilities – some severe – mental retardation, cerebral palsy, epilepsy and autism. A number had feeding tubes, which fed a mushed, gruel-like cereal into their stomachs. Many residents had severe contractures, contorted arms and legs pulled towards their bodies, at severe angles, caused by lack of exercise and staying too long in the same position. Some residents wore mittens, so they wouldn't chew beyond their nails, into their fingertips.

At the far end of the room were, what could only be described as cages – used for residents who became violent. Nearby were helmets; disabilities caused some residents to bang their heads on the wall or floor.

Most of the staff I met was caring and compassionate; professionals working, in an understaffed, decrepit

facility. But, a few were clearly detached and indifferent. Some, reportedly, were angry and abusive.

I'd like to say I took it all in as a professional. But actually, the visit was gut-wrenching.

So the story of Sunland isn't one of a fun, haunted house. (Tallahassee Democrat, April 28, 2016)

Sunland was emblematic of stained pages in a shameful chapter in our nation's history, when many people with severe disabilities were *warehoused* in large institutions – out of sight and mind. Some couldn't live at home because of health problems or lack of programs to help

parents. Others never made it home from the hospital; doctors telling parents their newborns were grossly handicapped, would function in society and needed to be "placed" in an institution.

In 1979, I was working for the Director of the Developmental Services Program – the , tireless advocate Charles Kimber. A resident died at Sunland and he asked me to investigate. I spoke with staff, doctors in the facility and in the community and reviewed records pulled from decades of moldy files in the basement. The resident died of

peritonitis, a bowel infection, resulting from a fecal impaction. It *might* have been prevented and treated with enemas, laxatives and antibiotics

My findings: no abuse of dangerous negligence, rather, his death was the result government looking the other way, of state-sponsored, institutional abandonment. Too few staff, some inadequately trained, trying to care for too many people.

At the time, it was the standard of care throughout the country for people with disabilities. Elsewhere in the U.S., there were decrepit facilities considerably worse.

Things began to change, in the 70s and 80s. Prompted by class action lawsuits, parent, professional and volunteer advocacy, innovative program administrators and new laws. In 1975, Florida mandated that people with disabilities had the right to participate in daily activities – just like anyone else – and to live in the "least restrictive environment." Former Sunland residents



moved into group homes, small, specialized facilities, and with supervision, their own apartments. A new Medicaid program funded training and home care; job training and meaningful day programs were established - like Tallahassee's Pyramid Studios. The program focuses on developing artistic skills in people with disabilities. One student, creates extraordinary abstracts, which have been exhibited nationally and sell hundreds of dollars. She paints with her feet.

She used to live in Sunland.

(I teach a karate class there, twice a week, for six adults with disabilities.)

Did Sunland represent state sponsored evil? Some would say yes. From my experiences, it was more a matter of governmental supported benign neglect – bred by avoidance, poor funding and lack of imagination.

Don't trivialize Sunland's past as a good, ghost story. Though, by today's standards, house of horrors will do.

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