

Davis

has seen worst of Bryce



now seeks
the best

Legendary Alabama newspaper editor and publisher Paul Davis has long been associated with the mental health and disabilities reform move-

door to Partlow," Davis said. "I had five brothers so we'd go to Partlow and play ball with the patients. The more I visited there the more I realized how many of

them were just abandoned. And what we especially noticed about the young boys we'd play with was that they weren't mentally retarded, as they were then labeled. They were just dumb kids. And they ran the institution."

These youngsters, according to Davis, were called "work boys" and they did indeed perform the majority of the labor and supervision on the place. This was during the 1940s and 1950s.

"These work boys, who were about our age, would drive the tractors, milk the cows, feed the hogs, peel the potatoes and cook supper for the residents. They'd have a five-gallon tin full of milk still warm from the cows, and they'd mix in some day-old bread from town. That's what the residents would eat, that and some boiled potatoes. My



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ment in his home state. He didn't have to go far to learn all about the subject.

"I grew up in what was called Alberta City, six blocks from the University of Alabama campus, pretty much right next

those patients didn't need to be there at all. There were people in the institution from age six to 66. Some of them had only slight-to-moderate intellectual disabilities, or just physical disabilities. Lots of

brothers and I were there all the time. We'd just come and go as we pleased. And we saw this every day."

Davis grew up in this environment but eventually became interested in newspapers and journalism. After he spent time working for a daily in Texas he was homesick for Alabama and asked renowned Alabama publisher Buford Boone for a job on the *Tuscaloosa News*.

Reporter in a volatile setting

"I bluffed my way into that paper in the early 1960s and it didn't take them long to figure out I couldn't do much," Davis said with a laugh. "They gave me the 3 a.m. shift where I would go to every funeral home and fire station and hospital emergency room in town. I also wrote the obituaries. Boone said they were going to keep me on the staff until they got their money back from hiring me in the first place. It just so happens that this was also the time when there were riots on the university campus and they were burning down buildings. The FBI was down here investigating, trying to figure out exactly what was going on. I was in on that, too, as the only reporter inside Foster Auditorium with Gov. George

Wallace when he made his 'stand in the schoolhouse door.'"

In this unique yet volatile time and place, Davis also became aware that half of the hospital beds in the state of Alabama were located in Tuscaloosa. There was a huge VA hospital, plus Druid City Hospital, and a four-story TB hospital. And then, of course, there were Bryce and Partlow, which between them at that time had 10,000 beds.

"There was this huge industry in our midst and I thought we should be covering it. Boone agreed and I went onto the medical beat. There was a lot more going on there than we realized."

Among other things, Davis found out that the thoracic surgeon at the TB hospital had no training in thoracic surgery. Young people were believed to be dying as a result.

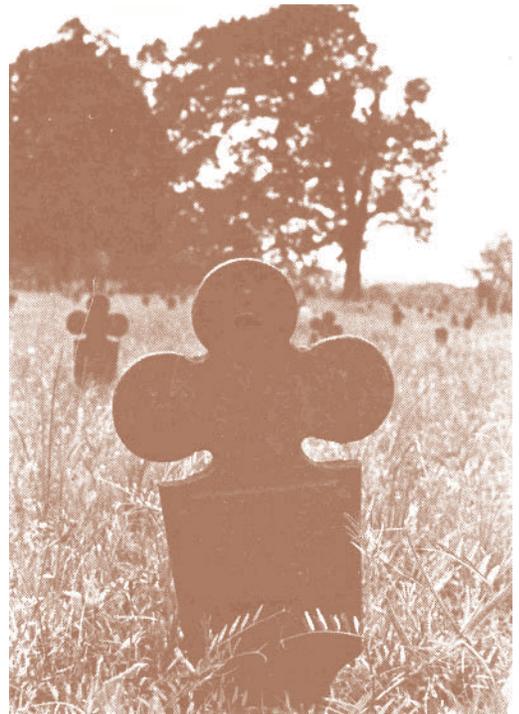
"Complicating this situation was that the surgeon was my publisher's best buddy," Davis said. "Boone just demanded to know whether what I was telling him was the truth and I said it was. So he said print it."

The TB hospital was shut down as a result of Davis's investigation and reporting. He also sat in with the board at Druid City Hospital as it went through desegregation. It came off without incident. But the big story came out of Davis's return to his old childhood ball-playing sites: Bryce and Partlow.

Back to Bryce

"Oh, it was a bad time in these places," he recalled. "You'd have 200 men and 200 women on one ward at Bryce. Terribly overcrowded. And this was a time when they were slowly transitioning from physical restraints to chemical restraints. I'd go in there and see people with their arms tied to a rocking chair to keep them from moving around. And the orderlies would be going through the wards just dispensing

Thorazine or some other mind-altering drug at will. They were basically using



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the stuff as a management technique, to make it easier to care for the patients. And I'd leave Bryce and go to Partlow and it would be the same thing over there."

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But what really bothered Davis were the deaths.

"If someone soiled themselves they'd just bend them over and spray them with a garden hose," he said. "One young boy died when they shoved a hose into his rectum that ruptured his spleen. There were no thermostats in the showers and people were getting scalded to death. I

made a decision that took me back to my earliest days on that newspaper: I vowed that I was going to write a story on the death of every patient from Bryce or Partlow who died under strange circumstances. And I tried to do that."

At the time, Davis recalled, there was not a lot of dignity associated with these patient deaths.

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"Some of the stories were just awful," Davis recalled. "A superintendent might say 'Well Johnny is dying, just take him to the infirmary.' At the infirmary Johnny might become comatose waiting for the doctor to show up, if the doctor ever did show up. And then I found out that the doctor wasn't even licensed to practice medicine in Alabama. Some of the doctors who worked there could not speak English well enough to communicate with the patients anyway. The doctors made very little money. The hospitals were running on next to no money in every department."

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Davis said in the years he covered this beat, he had at least one death to write about on a regular basis.

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Davis said he knew that his articles were starting to get attention – "raising a stink" as he called it -- the day he was met at the Bryce front door by a guard with a baseball bat.

"Up until that day I had been free to come and go as I pleased, just like when we were little kids growing up there playing ball. Now they said I couldn't come inside."

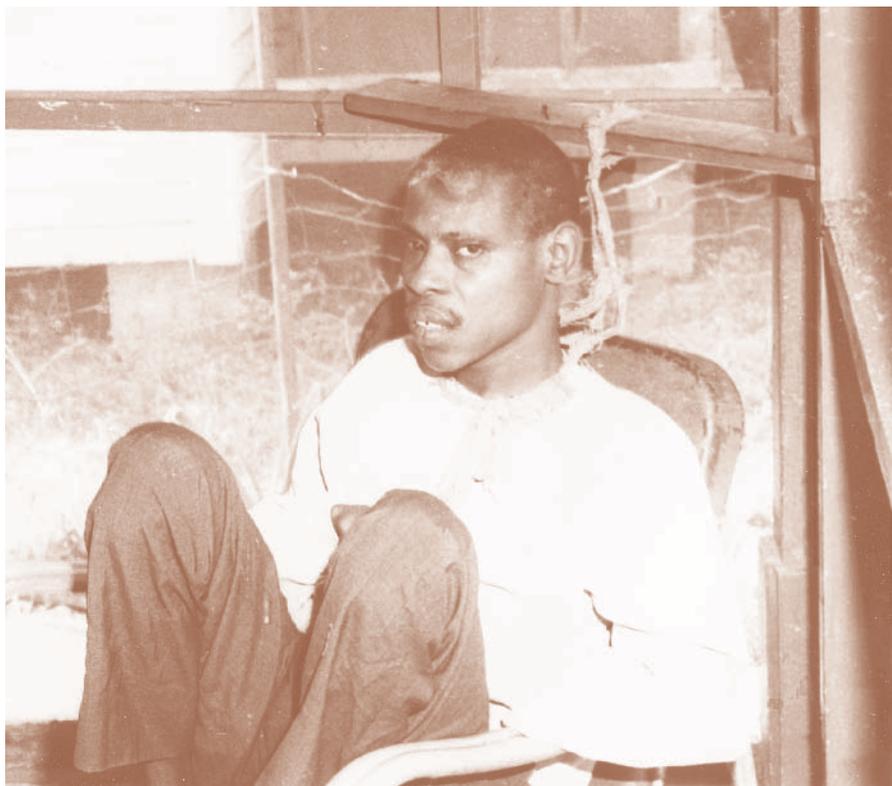
After being threatened, Davis retreated to a nearby café and telephoned United States Attorney Ira DeMent.

Changes on the horizon

"I told Ira I wanted to keep dropping in, and that I wanted to go in there at night. I didn't want 'em to have time to fix up the wards when they knew I was coming. Ira got a police escort and came to Tuscaloosa and thirty minutes later he explained the situation to the man at the door and he just said 'Yes sir!' I was able to get in then, but by this time things had gone so far that changes were about to be made. Big changes."

Davis emphasized that he never felt like the orderlies and staff were deliberately cruel or were practicing hard-core physical abuse. It was more a case – with some notable exceptions – of benign neglect, and of being overworked and underpaid in the cramped, crowded, dirty facility.

"They had so many people to take care of," he said. "Take for example their plan



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to just sterilize young women. There would be no bleeding then, and it would simplify things for the staff. Like Thorazine, they just looked on sterilization as a management technique."

"One example of someone who didn't need to be there was my longtime friend Eugene Ward. We got Eugene out and he lived well, worked and thrived in Mobile for the rest of his life. He was also a leader in his church. He even got on Judge Johnson's human rights commission at the hospital. That's irony for you, going from being an inmate to having free run of the place. Eugene Ward. One of thousands of people who never should have been in either one of those places."

Does the state have an obligation?

During this same tumultuous period, when the institutions were about to lay

off hundreds of staff members, Davis's close friend Attorney George Dean came to Tuscaloosa to defend some students accused of rioting on the University of Alabama campus. Davis told Dean about the situation at Bryce and Partlow and, over several days, they came up with a fundamental question.

"We asked ourselves whether, if someone was committed to the state for care, did the state have a binding obligation to provide that care? At the time almost anyone could be committed for almost any reason. If Granny's slipping a little bit – burning the biscuits, let's say -- and you wanted her out of the way, just get the family doctor and probate judge to work with you and the next thing you know the Sheriff is delivering Granny to Tuscaloosa. And she'd end up in the graveyard with a spike. As I've said over and over, many – maybe most – of those people didn't need to be there. But since



they *were* there, was the state obligated to provide treatment? That was our big question.”

As history has shown, when Federal District Judge Frank Minis Johnson, Jr. was presented with the question he said that yes, the state *is* obligated to provide treatment. And Judge Johnson went on to spell out in detail what these minimum standards of care should be, right down to the number of doctors, nurses, and social workers. When the state of Alabama figured this out it went to the other extreme, since there was no way it could afford these new standards.

“This is how the move to community-based treatment was born, in Alabama and around the country,” Davis said. “But it went too far too fast. Lots of the people who needed to be in Bryce and Partlow



were essentially dumped onto the streets. Where are those thousands of people who needed treatment, who needed care?

Where are they now? Many of them are in some of our excellent community-based facilities around the state. But my guess

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is that lots of them are also in our prison system.”

During this tumultuous time Davis and his family members hired several of the Bryce and Partlow patients into minimum wage jobs, gave them food prep training in the family’s KFC restaurants, and taught them basic piecework and assembly skills. Many of those same workers rode to their homes around the state on a Greyhound bus and got jobs and supported themselves for the rest of their lives. So Davis continues to wonder: where is the balance between over-commitment and taking care of those who truly need it?

Historical Committee can help rectify past problems

“I think the work of the historical committee is very important,” Davis said. “I certainly want to see the main building and surrounding grounds kept, but I also want to ensure that the University of Alabama pays what the property is truly worth. And I think they will. I’d then like to see us develop a really *national* museum of mental health, and show Bryce for what it really was, both good and bad.”

“Peter Bryce was a wonderful man, a humane man,” he concluded. “He was there to help the patients under his care. And he did so to the best of his ability during some very difficult times. Now there are 209 acres left of what was once a 2,000 acre campus. In its prime it was really like a small, self-sustaining city. We need to get what the property is worth, build a new Bryce that is world-class and second to none, and develop a national museum. We owe these things to all those people who spent their lives at Bryce and Partlow whether they needed to or not, and to the memory of all those people – who have a number instead of a name – under a spike in the cemetery. We owe at least this much to all of them.”

