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Dix and Bryce difference makers

By PAUL DAVIS

Owner

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Dorothea Dix left her home in Massachusetts at a very young age, starting a journey that would take her across many states in America, into the halls of Congress and around the world. She was a feminist, an activist, a nurse, and a first-class hell raiser during a time when women were expected to stay home to cook and raise their babies.

She had left an abusive family and a drunken father to seek a better life. Along the way she became a champion for the mentally ill and the poor and by happenstance she also met a young man named Peter Bryce. There was an instant intellectual bonding. Both shared the view that the mentally ill across this nation and around the world were due compassionate care and the responsibility for that care rested with governing bodies at every level.

She was right, of course, but not many states were willing to pay a price for the care of the mentally ill, especially the poor. She started in her home state of Massachusetts and pursued her efforts until programs were put in place to aid those carrying the burden of mental illness.

Standing before the legislature in Massachusetts she said, "I proceed, Gentlemen, briefly to call your attention to the present state of Insane Persons confined within this Commonwealth, in cages, stalls, pens! Chained, naked, beaten with rods, and lashed into obedience." The outcome of her lobbying was a bill to expand the state's mental hospital.

Her success there led her into other states. She talked long and convincingly with the young Dr. Peter Bryce, a very intelligent young psychiatrist living in South Carolina. She brought him to Tuscaloosa and introduced him to like-minded individuals who wanted to do better by the hundreds and hundreds of mentally ill and retarded citizens of our state. He was hired and proceeded in providing humane treatment of those in his care.

Little was known about mental illness at that time. Dr. Bryce felt those tired souls in his care would benefit from basic human kindness. Sunshine and work in the 300 acres that surrounded his hospital. The struggle was constant to get adequate funding from state government so he set forth to have his patients plow the grounds, plant the crops, harvest the crops, cook and serve the food, raise the cattle and pigs, operate a huge laundry and make do with what he had.

That was therapy, with kindness, and it was carried out without human restraints in the form of the straitjackets and shackles and without the punishments so often inflicted on those who were ill.

Bryce patients produced enough fruits, vegetables and meat that they found buyers in Tuscaloosa. The more success Peter Bryce had in caring for its patients and feeding them and making some minor profits off the fruits of their patients' labor the less the state was inclined to increase badly needed funding for the hospital.

You do more you get less. That's the way lawmakers in this state and many others viewed mental hospitals. Alabama's largest hospital for care of the mentally ill--The Alabama Insane Hospital--was much later named Bryce Hospital in honor of Dr. Peter Bryce. He died in 1892.

Sadly, Bryce had seen its better days. At one point around 35 years ago the state even cut its funding to Bryce, making it very clear that in a time when we are learning so much more about mental illness and were gaining access to more robust drugs, which could stabilize sick people and halt mood swings, Alabama was unwilling to take part in providing adequate care for those that most needed its help.

That led to federal litigation before the real governor of Alabama, Frank M. Johnson, the jurist who did more to change Alabama than anyone in a century. He took over the hospital and demanded immediate, forceful change and declared that adequate treatment in the least restrictive environment be instituted in our mental institution. That historic case was called Wyatt versus Stickney. Judge Johnson mandated the most stringent rules and regulations that this nation had ever seen. It became the model for the nation.

The case came to a conclusion in 2005 under the leadership of Gov. Bob Riley; after 33 years, through the tenure of nine Alabama governors and 14 mental health commissioners. It was the longest mental health case in the nation's history. Alabama spent \$15 million fighting a simple request that its mentally ill be given proper care.

I was in the courtroom when the suit was filed, throughout the trial and when it all came to a close.

Now what? Well, Bryce hospital will now be sold to the University of Alabama so that the land-locked University can grow. A new, world-class, state-of-the-art hospital for the mentally ill will be built on the grounds of Partlow State School in Tuscaloosa. It will become a reality because of funds from the University of Alabama in purchasing Bryce and the proceeds of a state bond issue.

I set in the Governor's office Wednesday with members of the Board of Trustees of the Department of Mental Health and took great joy in offering the motion on that historic day to provide relief for the University of Alabama and much more to provide hope for the mentally ill, those who care for them, and those who love them.

(Paul Davis is owner of The Tuskegee News. You may contact him at Paul_Davis@charter.net)