New Approaches to the Retarded Bring Increased Hope

Margaret Bourke-White

1933: Youngsters returning from farm chores at Letchworth Village 36 years ago. At that time, farming was considered the key to treatment of retarded.

By LACEY FOSBURGH
Special to The New York Times

THIELLS, N.Y., June 19—When night comes to Letchworth Village here on the western shore of the Hudson River, its 3,791 inmates retire to small stone cottages. There, in darkened dormitories, some holding teddy bears, they wait for sleep to come.

They are mentally retarded and they have been brought here to live in the shadows of the high, arching sycamore trees to find protection and perhaps happiness — perhaps even an identity.

Day in, day out, for years, they stay here, some with blank eyes and distorted faces, others with the innocence and purity of children untouched by harm.

Some lie in the thick grass of the institution's grounds or perch immobile on the edge of their beds. Others romp wildly, gleefully, unconcerned that decades are passing.

Wide Age Range

The patients range in age from 2 years to 80. When the three oldest first saw the woods and hills of this 2,000-acre tract in Rockland County over half a century ago, the concepts underlying the treatment and understanding of the mentally retarded were quite different.

The village was named for William Pryor Letchworth, a 19th-century philanthropist who was active in mental-health work.

A brief, symbolic ceremony that took place here today, while the patients were eating lunch and sitting in the sunshine, illustrates how substantial these changes have been at the state institution.

"This marks the transition between the old and the new," said Dr. Jacob Schneider, director of Letchworth Village, as he addressed several hundred officials of the state's 13 institutions for the mentally retarded.

Dr. Schneider opened a 37-year-old tin box. Inside were old stamps and coins, newspapers and other items recalling earlier days. In 1932 the box was placed inside the cornerstone of what was then considered the key to all treatment—a cow barn.

This year the large stone barn, an obsolete unused structure, was demolished. In 30 years Letchworth Village has changed from a farm where the patients worked in the fields, milked cows and grew vegetables, to a training ground for the outside world, with miniature factories and workshops.

Photographs for The New York Times by ERNEST SISTO

Dr. Frederic Grunberg, deputy commissioner for mental retardation in New York State, observing a resident at a work table packaging products for local industry.

1969: A teacher instructing a student in dressmaking at a village workshop. This and other activities at Letchworth are meant to prepare the patients for outside world.

"Once the mentally retarded were considered shameful specimens—they were taken away from society so no one would see them, and were kept in institutions forever," said Dr. Frederic Grunberg, the 42-year-old state deputy commissioner for mental retardation. "The main thing was to keep them busy and contented.

"Now we train them to do a job, and we return as many of them as we can to society. Treatment is designed to give them as normal a life as possible. This means no more farming, no more pastoral, rural life, but learning trades, doing chores which are commercially viable, whether waxing floors or cleaning dishes."

Survey Quoted

A recent study, he said, showed that one-third of the 26,600 people in the state's 13 institutions for the retarded do not belong there because they had the capacity to function in the community.

Three per cent of the overall population is believed to have an I.Q. of under 75, which is considered retarded. Only 10 per cent of these live in institutions.

Life has changed for the retarded since the early nineteen-hundreds, when Letchworth Village was built, since the cornerstone was laid and even since the early sixties. The change centers on hope —especially, but not exclusively, for the young.

Anna, a 16-year-old Puerto Rican girl from New York City, who has been here since she was four, illustrates this.

"I want to go to work," she said earnestly as she scrubbed dishes, part of her training to be a domestic worker. "I don't want to live here all my life. I want to be someone. I want to be on my own."

"People have always associated mental retardation with despair and hopelessness," said Dr. Grunberg, "but I think there is so much hope, so much that can be done with them. The main thing is to bring them up to their potential.

Like a Minority Group

"They want to be as useful and important and recognized as anybody, but they have always had the same status as a minority group. They are alienated and lonely not because of any inability of their own, but because of the way the world regards them.

"But I think society understands more now that it has a role in their rehabilitation and for this reason I'm very optimistic. Their salvation is through community work."

In the 150 low stone buildings that are dotted about the countryside, inmates who in former years would have had hours of free time now participate in training programs, recreation and entertainment.

The 32 resident physicians, 20 of whom are psychiatrists, decide each patient's schedule on the basis of his capacity. There are different programs, for example, for the 847 children, about 400 of whom attend school, and for the adults. Even though they are at about the same intellectual level, the adults are emotionally more mature.

This is all part of a new technique to stimulate and motivate them. Specific programs have been arranged in the last four years in which the inmates are paid for jobs

Continued on Page 66, Column 3

The New York Times
Published: June 20, 1969

New Hope for Retarded

Continued From Page 47

performed either in Letchworth Village under contract to companies, or in businesses outside.

"I do so good, I see people and I talk to them—I make money," said Florence, who is 38. She is one of the many people whose lives have been changed because they are working. She has been here 16 years and now in recent weeks she has been busy on Mondays and Thursday waxing floors in a nearby town.

Seated outside in the sun, Florence rambled on to another subject.

"I wrote her a letter again," she said vaguely, "but she never answers and she never sees me. It makes me feel so bad. My brother-in-law put me here 16 years ago. He didn't care for me. I haven't seen them since."

Dr. Schneider, who has been director at Letchworth for four years, watched Florence and said:

"She's not here because she's retarded, she's here because no one wanted her. She only needs minimal supervision and need never have come."

He added that there were many people here like that who belong in society.

The problem is to find suitable work and a suitable way of life for the retarded. Such acute awareness that they need the same kind of fulfillment as normal people reflects the widespread changing attitudes towards the problem.

Mrs. Anthony Romeo, who has been a dining-room attendant for seven years, watched some women eating. Some were very young, some very old. Some were unkempt and withdrawn, some were carefully dressed and cheerful.

"They are innocent victims," Mrs. Romeo said. "They were born with their problem, it's not their fault."

She paused to watch Dorothy, a lively 70-year-old woman who was sent there by her parents 49 years ago after she had run away from her home in New York City.

"They want love and understanding," Mrs. Romeo said. "They need more of it and to make up for its absence in their real lives, they pretend they have families, they pretend someone really cares about them."

Outside, Harold waited for the bus to take him into a nearby town. He lives alone there in a small hotel room, but to him it's the best thing in the world.

"I first came here when I was a little boy," the 43-year-old man recalled. After nine years here he was discharged and returned to his family. He worked at menial city jobs until this spring when he came back to Letchworth, employed as a sweeper.

"It's so good to be here again, it's like coming home," he said.

The New York Times
Published: June 20, 1969