Laconia State School: documenting a history some would rather forget

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Gordon DuBois came to the Laconia State School in 1977 and continued working there until the last resident was moved out in 1991. During his tenure he witnessed the final chapter of the notorious institution's history. After its close he fell into the role of the institution's archivist, providing an epilogue of sorts for the school, giving historical presentations to social groups and organizations throughout the state.

Now, with the help of some videographers, the therapist-turned-historian has created a documentary film, which will be screened at 7 p.m. on May 10 at the Laconia Middle School. DuBois said he wanted to make the film to not only document the history of an important institution but also to illustrate how social values regarding disabled persons have changed since the school first opened more than a century ago.

"We thought it was important for people to understand where we have come from, not only from a professional standpoint but also as a society," DuBois said.

The school's story starts in 1901, when an act of the state legislature called for the institution's creation.

The state school was conceived to serve two purposes. The first was to provide a home for the "feeble-minded" children who were contributing to overcrowding in "almshouses" around the state. "The other idea was that children who were feeble-minded needed to be isolated from the rest of society," he said.

The school opened in 1903 and by 1905 its mission was expanded to adults.

Those who lived in the institution were initially called "inmates" and through the years were referred to as "patient," "client," and finally, "resident." Some of them would have had conditions that would today be called developmental disabilities, though there were any number of circumstances that would land a person at the school. For example, orphans who scored poorly on intelligence tests would be assigned there. Sometimes it was for children whose parents were fed up with misbehavior. Poverty appears to have been a reason for admittance in some cases, while in other cases children were sent to the school if they thought to have inherited defective character traits from their ancestors.

"It kind of became a dumping ground for people who were rejected," he said.

It was a school that was established during an era when eugenics held great influence. "It was an accepted science, this was how you improved society," said DuBois. Along those lines, a law was passed in 1918 allowing for sterilization surgeries to be carried out on residents. The law was amended in 1927 to eliminate the need for the resident's consent if the school superintendent and head doctor prescribed the procedure. Between 1918 and 1960, when the policy was abolished, 450 residents were sterilized, three-fourths of which were women. For many years, sterilization was a requirement for a resident's release.

By the time DuBois began his work at the school, it was on the cusp of major change.

"When I first started working in this field, the only thing I knew was that anybody with a significant disability lived in an institution. To think differently was very difficult," he said.

Despite the stigma that the institution still carries, DuBois said he's proud of his work there and said his co-workers should be, too. "Ninety percent of people there were good, solid people wanting to do the right thing, wanting to treat people well." He said staff members would take residents home for holidays, would take them out for dinner on their birthdays. Still, it was hard to avoid the fact that two staff members would be required to care for a ward of 30 residents, many of whom required significant support.

"It was difficult, but in some cases we didn't know anything different. As societal values changed during the civil rights movement, it opened up my thinking, it opens up your mind to thinking differently."

One thing that was clear was that there was a need for services for disabled residents in the state. Population at the school was greater than 1,000 in the 1970s, with a waiting list hundreds of names long. The overcrowding and poor staffing levels resulted in living conditions on the campus off North Main Street that were described as "desolate" and "devoid of stimulation" by an administrator visiting from a similar facility in Connecticut.

It was an odd time to work at the school, said DuBois. "You would know that things are wrong, but you try and work in those circumstances and do the best you can with limited staff, limited resources." Although the school was one of the region's largest employers, he said it was uncomfortable for him to tell others what he did for a living. Staffers as well as residents lived with the institution's stigma. "We were just carrying out what was accepted social policy at the time."

In 1978, a group of parents sued the state, claiming the school failed to carry out the state's responsibility of serving its disabled residents. The suit led to many changes at the school and spelled the beginning of the end for the institution. The population was reduced over the next decade by placing more and more residents in community-based support networks as those resources were developed. The school closed for good in January, 1991.

As the institution's final days ticked by, some of the school's administrators felt that the records of the school should be kept, and DuBois became an archivist, spending the next five years cataloging and storing the materials in the Department of Research and Archives in Concord. He's presented

the history of the school to more than 40 audiences, much of the time inviting former residents to help tell the story.

As the years progressed, he took notice that the number of living former residents was decreasing, so he secured a grant to record the oral histories of 20 residents.

"They're powerful interviews," said DuBois, and they comprise much of the roughly hour-long documentary, which the filmmaker has titled "Lost in Laconia."

The film shown on May 10 is nearly-complete. He will introduce the film and will host a panel discussion following the screening. The panel includes an historian, a parent and advocate who participated in the 1978 lawsuit and two former residents of the school.

DuBois and the videographers he's working with will perform the final round of editing. He expects a final version to be ready later this year, at which point he'll be submitting it to film festivals and distributing it to public access television stations.

When asked why the documentary is worth his effort, DuBois answered by paraphrasing one of the former residents he interviewed: "So people will never have to live the life I lead." He noted that those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it. "That's what it's all about, that people with disabilities would not be put in institutions, would not be isolated from society."

Since leaving the state school, he said many former residents have shown that they can live as members of their communities. They deserve to be members of their family, to enjoy the dignity of privacy and to enjoy their civil liberties. They deserve, he said, "to have friends, to have relationships, to be loved."