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Closing the doors: Laconia State School documentary shines light on the negative impact of mental institutions

By **Laurenne Ramsdell / lramsdell@fosters.com**

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LACONIA — An organization known as People First of New Hampshire has begun a campaign that calls for the closure of all mental institutions in the nation, using the former Laconia State School as an example of how such facilities affected hundreds of lives.

Celebrating 20 years since its founding, the self-advocacy nonprofit organization has taken its efforts to shed light on the negative impacts that such institutions can have to a whole new level. To do so, People First have teamed up with Accompany Video Productions to create a short film that features the story of five individuals who lived for many years as residents at the former Laconia State School.

The film, “Institutions: Close Them!” highlights the living conditions and quality of life that these five former residents say they experienced during their time at the state school located formerly on a remote farmland property in the Lakes Region.

“Segregation and isolation of any group is barbaric,” reads a flyer for the film. “It is past the time where institutions for persons with intellectual disabilities be placed where they belong — history’s garbage dump.”

According to Janet Hunt, executive coordinator of People First of N.H., all members of the organization strongly believe that people with disabilities should be treated as equals in the fullest sense of the word. Because of that, the organization’s members argue that facilities deemed as institutions being used as a place for people with disabilities to be segregated from the general population should be closed.

“There are several of these institutions still open across the country,” said Hunt. “We want to make people aware that there is more to life than living in an institution.”

In 1901, legislation was passed in the Granite State that allowed for the creation of an institution known as the New Hampshire School for Feeble-Minded Children. This legislation was passed as an effort to “better serve feebleminded children” by having them live in a special residential facility. Eventually the law was broadened to include individuals between the ages of 3 and 45.

According to records from the Laconia Historical and Museum Society, a site was selected by a board of trustees who chose a 250-acre farmland property in Laconia in the area of Parade Road. The state built three original facilities on the property, including a house for the superintendent of the school, a brick dormitory building for both genders, and a school house.

By 1903, the N.H. School for Feeble-Minded Children was opened and had 57 children as residents. Within three years, the number of residents climbed to 82 with a waiting list of over 117 individuals.

Records indicate that some of the “inmates,” which they were sometimes referred to rather than residents, came from almshouses and orphanages, while others were sent to the school directly from their homes.

Over the years, the name of the N.H. School for Feeble-Minded Children was changed to the Laconia State School.

Some residents were able to attend educational lessons in a tight quartered classroom setting, while others were out on the farm property working to provide food for the school’s many residents. Records from the historical society report that the majority of residents who worked on the farm were not paid, as they were expected to earn their living at the school if they were capable of doing so.

When the U.S. Department of Labor mandated that all people working at an institution be paid fair and equitable wage, farming operations ceased at the school because it became too costly of a program for the state to maintain.

By 1940, there were reportedly more than 600 residents living at the home. That number nearly doubled by 1970, as there were more than 1,100 residents living at the school.

Around that time, the school started getting some negative attention from community members and the press after claims were made that living conditions at the state school were far too poor for the number of residents being housed on site.

Hunt has direct ties to the former Laconia State School, as she started working as an aid in the early 1980s.

“I saw a lot of injustices there,” said Hunt.

She recalled that the living conditions were “pretty harsh,” as bathrooms were unsanitary and lacked separate stalls. She noted that sleeping quarters were overwhelming, as residents were deprived privacy.

“The beds were lined up one by one next to each other, so there was no privacy for anyone,” said Hunt.

She claimed that residents’ belongings were not kept in individual closets, and hygiene utensils such as toothbrushes were all kept together in one cabinet.

Hunt is not the only People First of N.H. member who has direct ties to the former state school, as Roberta Gallant, a woman featured in the short film “Institutions: Close Them!” said she too can vividly remember being exposed to many injustices occurring at the school.

Gallant, 61, said that when she was born, her umbilical cord was wrapped around her neck depriving her brain of oxygen.

“The trauma severely impacted my brain’s development,” said Gallant, noting that she was soon diagnosed with mental retardation and a minor learning disability.

On Oct. 27, 1956, Gallant was brought by her parents to the Laconia State School and admitted as a resident at the age of five. She said her parents did not have the skills or finances to take care of a child with disabilities, and instead opted to

place her in an institution that was advertised as being a place that could give such individuals the attention they need.

“I became homesick,” said Gallant of her initial reaction to being admitted. “I constantly cried every day and night.”

Gallant would remain at the Laconia State School for 25 years.

When asked what life was like as a resident of an institution, Gallant painted vivid pictures of abuse, neglect, and life as an outcast. She said they were punished severely if they misbehaved or had a flare up related to their disability.

“Just because we misbehaved, it still gave them no right to do what they did,” said Gallant.

Gallant said she felt the elementary and secondary education she was exposed to at the former state school was not to par, and that it prohibited her from excelling as an adult.

Frank Vinciguerra, one of the individuals featured as a former resident in People First’s 15-minute film, said he too was very unhappy during his time at Laconia State School.

“It was like a prison to me,” said Vinciguerra in the film.

He recalled some of the severe punishments that residents were subject to for misbehaving or having outbursts, noting that he and his peers had cold water thrown on them and were forced to be locked up in rooms for long periods of time.

“They weren’t very nice at all,” said Vinciguerra of the staff at Laconia State School.

Another former resident featured in the film, Annabelle Horne, said the school was so overpopulated that at times, not every resident had a bed to sleep in. Former resident Joanne Salvas, also featured in the film, recalled that sometimes residents were put into straight jackets to be restrained.

“It’s not an easy thing to watch,” said Salvas.

It's clear that all five residents shared a similar goal, and that was to leave the confines of the institution. Their wishes would soon be met.

In 1979, a class-action suit known as Garrity v. Gallen was filed against the state by parents of state school residents. Records from the Laconia Historical and Museum Society report that the court ruled in favor of the parents and more than 250 state school residents were sent to individual and group foster homes.

Throughout the 1980s, the number of residents being housed at the Laconia State School was reduced dramatically.

On June 22, 1981, Gallant was released and entered the surrounding community for the first time in her adult life as a citizen who was able to utilize all her rights.

"It was just a new day for me," said Gallant. "Everything was just a whole very new world."

Gallant, now a resident of Concord, lives in her own apartment and is using everyday to make up the lost time she had while living in an institution to experience all that life has to offer in the Granite State. She told Foster's she spends her days frequenting downtown stores, doing some shopping and picking things up at the pharmacy.

"I can do more things for myself than I could at Laconia State School," said Gallant. "I have much more freedom to do that than I did when I lived there."

With her newfound freedom, Gallant decided to join the organization known as People First of N.H. in hopes of shedding light on the negative impacts of institutions for those who can't.

"People with disabilities do not belong in institutions," said Gallant. "They should live in the community just like anyone else."

Hunt agrees whole heartedly and has spent much of her adult life working as a caseworker for those looking to leave institutionalized homes and facilities like the former Laconia State School.

"Philosophically, it's the right move for these individuals to live in communities rather than institutions," said Hunt.

On January 31, 1991, the Laconia State School closed its doors forever.

About a year later, People First of N.H. began working collaboratively to shed light on the injustices that residents of disability institutions experience while being segregated from the general public.

The organization's goal has since transformed into a mission to have the roughly 2,000 state schools and institutions still operating in the United States closed down.

In early June, "Institutions: Close Them!" was shown to a jam packed audience at the Red River Theatre in Concord. Hunt said the feedback she and other People First of N.H. members received following the showing was positive and inspiring.

The group will share the story of the former Laconia State School and its many residents again at an advocacy conference in Minnesota next month.

For more information on People First of N.H., visit www.peoplefirstofnh.org