

The Remembrance Project- Remembering the Past to Move to the Future

I had been visiting Hawaii State Hospital every month for a meeting and taking time to visit some consumers. With knowledge of the search for remains at some state hospitals in the continental USA, I kept asking the chaplain: “Where are the patient remains?” A generation ago, people spent many years, even their lifetimes, in state institutions. Last August, Dr. Tom Hester, our new Adult Mental Health Division Medical/Clinical Director, came aboard. He wasted no time and told me that he had attended a memorial service for thousands of unknown remains at the Georgia Central State Hospital in Milledgeville. There was a history of neglect of these burials, often marked with a simple metal stake and a number. Over time, records were lost and so those patients were forgotten. In fact, Dr. Hester had issued an apology on behalf of the Georgia Department of Mental Health for this history to a consumer group at a memorial dedication. The consumers had raised the funds for its construction. We consulted some of the longest serving employees in our Division, who told us to look in a particular section of an outside cemetery. There were evidently no remains on the hospital campus, which has grown considerably smaller over the years.

I enlisted the aid of Dr. Hester and the Hawaii State Hospital Chaplain, Rev. David Edwards, and we located two bronze markers in a fine place, Hawaiian Memorial Park Cemetery. There were a total of 668 cremated remains inurned under two bronze plaques on concrete in an area of the cemetery with a nice ocean view. My initial reaction was one of grief and I did not want to do anything about the situation. The inscription read “Here rest in eternal peace the mortal remains of some six hundred and sixty-eight men and women, once patients of the Territorial Hospital in Kaneohe. Their cremated remains, accumulated over three decades, were inurned here on July 1, 1960. On that date, a special ceremony was held, attended by many people, honoring these dead.” There were then 10 columns of names. I invited some consumers to look at the plaques.

A group of consumers and family members held a small service on Christmas Eve Day followed by a nice luncheon. A minister who happens to also be a consumer presided. The project was described in an issue of the local Mental Health Association newsletter, “Innerview”. Soon others became interested in this story, and two members of the press interviewed me.

Some disturbing facts emerged. Evidently, for 30 years, the hospital had been cremating people and storing ashes in cardboard boxes in a basement room with names marked on them. Hawaii has a moist tropical climate, and the boxes deteriorated. Names faded and remains leaked out of mildewed boxes. An enterprising reporter named Jack Teehan brought this situation to light in Honolulu’s major newspaper in 1960 as well as the grim conditions at the Territorial Hospital, which held over 1200 people at the time. He wrote a series, an expose on the hospital. An editorial shamed the authorities into providing funds for a decent burial and the memorial service was held July 1 of that year. The remains were placed in four large containers and buried beneath these plaques.

On Sunday, February 10, of this year, the Honolulu Advertiser ran a major story on the front page of the local news section with some disturbing facts. For example, there were only 541 names listed and 668 sets of remains. Therefore, at least 127 remains were unknown. Some of the listed names were only partial, last name only, or such as “John Doe”. There was confusion: one consumer found her grandfather. However, the family had taken possession of his remains and there was a service and a marker on the island of Maui in his honor. The plaques were corroded and needed some restoration. A work order was financed by the hospital administration and the plaques were restored. The restoration occurred about the time the story broke in the newspaper. Some donations were received. One prominent out of state donor insisted on anonymity.

Various consumers have traveled to the site in beautiful windward Kaneohe and have brought flowers and even some toys. We consumers must remember those who suffered and died and came before, thus the Remembrance Project began.

“NASMHPD’s position is that forgotten and neglected graves of persons who died in state psychiatric hospitals sends a message of devaluing the people who struggled with mental illness, contributes to the burden of stigma (and discrimination) that people still face today, and perpetuates a negative image of the state hospital.”- Rhode Island Extra

Although the plaques were placed in an isolated area of the cemetery at the time, it is a well-chosen site and many ordinary citizens have been interred in the area. The goal of the Remembrance Project is to make certain that these unknowns are honored in some fashion, whether by the simple gesture of always having fresh flowers or with a future community memorial service. The cemetery personnel have always been helpful and courteous to the visitors. They have unflinchingly given good directions to the gravesite. Good care will ensure that neglect will never happen again. Let us move to a brighter future for mental health consumers through these actions. Never again!

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