



LET'S

NOT

FORGET

Forgotten history from the dark side of human nature is dangerous history. It tends to creep back and repeat itself. To remember and retell the stories of man's inhumanity to man is to have some chance of holding our harmful human tendencies at bay. To remember and retell the worst of our history helps contain it where it belongs - in the past as a lesson towards a better future.

*The disability support sector of our welfare system now has a generation of support workers with little or no historical context for their work. They only have a vague idea of the institutional era as something to do with housing disabled people in large buildings.*



They have no details of what life was actually like for people isolated and congregated behind these walls. Today's support workers gain their qualifications through workplace assessments without rigorous enquiry into, and reflection on, past practices. Many of these workers are so deprived of an historical context for their work that they think people who have disabilities have always lived in community based shared homes.

NWRSS holds a strong belief that it has a responsibility to teach and remind its support workers of the inhumane history of the disability service sector. It believes it should never let its support workers forget the cruelty that can arise within the human response to difference between fellow humans.



Let's not forget the unimaginable conditions for human life that were hidden behind locked doors as recently as the 1960's in Australia and which still prevail in some countries. People were left naked to walk in their own excrement. Being fed and hosed down was the only care and the monotony of idle time all that was offered.

*The cold, tiled rooms  
were designed for ease  
of cleaning rather than  
human habitation*





*Beds in large dormitories, were so densely packed in some institutions that people had to be walked across to reach the other side of the room.*

*Some people never left their beds. Their lives were confined to cribs, without love or attention beyond cleaning and feeding. The only education was learning to do nothing and the main therapy, immobilization.*





Even as conditions marginally improved ten years later in the 70's, large institutions were still practising mass house keeping at the expense of individuality. Time was still idle for most people and restraint was in regular use.

With nothing to do, people passed the time by waiting and dozing. People could rest, rest from the waiting and wait some more. Wherever you looked people were just waiting, passing time and wasting away.





*Although there were some warm smiles, abuse was still a rampant control measure against those who had not learnt to settle into a life of passing time. Loneliness and isolation were the only lifestyles.*

Let's not forget that privacy was never a consideration. Buildings were designed so no-one could ever pass out of sight. Even private, personal activities were left in full view. Toilets without seats were common and toilet paper a rarity.

For many, withdrawal was the only response. For a resilient few the human spirit still shone through in smiles, friendship, thoughtfulness and defiance. But potential went unnoticed and untapped.

Can this history repeat itself? Could it sneak up in different guises to crush the hard fought gains that have been made? Is it already beginning its creep, heavily disguised in rhetoric?

The struggle to get people into ordinary houses in ordinary numbers in ordinary streets in ordinary towns, small but important steps toward community inclusion, is already under challenge with government plans for mini multi bed hostels and increased numbers in group homes.

Are there insidious signs that might be nudging us back to such inhumane practices?

One of the telling characteristics of the institutional era was life wasting: being left in isolation, being precluded from participation.

An ominous observation was made by Sister Anotella; one of Mother Theresa's Sisters of Mercy and quoted in a December 2007 article in the Bulletin. One of the most affecting sights she sees in Australia, repeatedly, is in nursing homes for the elderly. 'You walk in and people are waiting, staring. Just hoping someone will come and talk to them'.

The photographs in this presentation were taken by Burton Blatt and Fred Kaplan. Their first collection, taken with a concealed camera in 1966 was published in a book called CHRISTMAS IN PURGATORY. Their collection from 1976 was produced as a slide presentation called THE FAMILY ALBUM. To see the full collections go to website.

Although these photographs were taken in America the author witnessed similar conditions in Melbourne, Victoria when he commenced working with disabled people in the early 70's

Such conditions have diminished in Australia but there are countries where similar or worse conditions are allowed to continue.

### **Neal Rodwell**

General Manager - North West Residential Support Services