

The Right to Live in Your Own Community

Robert's Story

I was placed into an institution as a baby because my mother was unable to provide the necessary care for me. The point I wish to make is that I was not placed there for my benefit but rather for the benefit of my mother. Much later when I returned to my family and my mother was unable to cope and was mentally unwell I was the one placed in a mental hospital, not my mother. As unbelievable as this may sound it is true.

We were put into the institutions not to meet our needs but the needs of others. This injustice has happened throughout the world and must be stopped. No one deserves to be institutionalised or be forced to live in an institution against their will.

Many people with a disability have been institutionalised. It is not just those of us with a psychiatric or intellectual disability. I have met people who are deaf, deaf/blind, blind and who have a physical disability who have been institutionalised. We have all shared similar experiences and been effected by institutionalisation, it is no different regardless of your disability.

Understanding Institutionalisation

Many in the community have an unrealistic view of institutions and believe they are needed to provide the care and support they perceive people with disabilities need.

For me, living in an institution meant my life was taken over by a service. The doctors seemed to have a lot of power but I was not sure who was really holding me there against my will. In the institution I slept in a bed alongside strangers, often 10 people in the same room. I saw no value in myself as a person and did not understand the idea of choice. I learnt to eat quickly or my food was thrown out or taken by others.

Like everyone else I became a slave to routine, my day was measured by the routine of the institution, not the time of day. I never left the institution, everyone came to the institution and I never got to go out. I seldom saw my family as my sister was also placed in care in another institution. I personally experienced the sexual, physical and emotion abuse that goes on in institutions.

I came to understand what happens to the staff, how they also become victims of the institutionalisation process and become institutionalised as well. How the institution develops a life of its own which is far removed from life in the community. It has its own values and ways of doing things. People are no longer an individual, they are part of a system and the system always wins. I quickly learnt not to challenge authority. When we are forced to live in an institution we never know if or when we will be able to leave. You look around and see people who have lived their whole life in an institution. It is the only life they know and are often scared to leave when this becomes a possibility.

I believe that all institutionalisation does at best is to put a person's life on hold and at worse it makes their needs even more profound.

What are the Alternatives

There is really only one and that is life in the community.

Locking people away from their family or friends or denying them the right to be part of the community, taking over another person's life and trying to say it is their best interests or forcing people to live in an institution and being institutionalised can never be justified.

I became the person I am to day because I finally got the support and assistance I needed to live in the community. My friends with a disability who are still being institutionalised or being forced to live in institutions deserve the same opportunity.

Regardless of their need for support or assistance a person with a disability can live a full and useful life in the community.

The key is providing the support and assistance they need to achieve this.

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