



Center on Human Policy

Burton Blatt's *Purgatory*

Up until the 1960s, exposés of institutions focused on mental hospitals for insane or mentally ill people. Institutions for feeble-minded, idiotic, or mentally retarded people were only an afterthought. This changed in the late 1960s and 70s. During this period, institutions for people with mental retardation—referred to as state schools, training schools, or state hospitals—were challenged by exposés, new ideas, and law suits.

“There is hell on earth,” wrote Burton Blatt (Blatt & Kaplan, 1966, p. v), “and in America there is a special inferno. We were visitors there during Christmas, 1965.” Blatt, then a professor at Boston University, had followed the controversy surrounding Senator Robert Kennedy’s unannounced visits to New York’s Willowbrook and Rome State Schools in fall 1965. Kennedy publicly denounced conditions at the institutions. In response, public officials and supporters of Governor Nelson Rockefeller accused Kennedy of painting a misleading picture of conditions at the institutions based on superficial tours. Blatt was aware that Kennedy had accurately portrayed the nature of conditions found at institutions.

With the aid of a friend, photographer Fred Kaplan, Blatt decided to expose institutional conditions on his own. He arranged for visits to four large state institutions in the Northeast at which Kaplan secretly took pictures of conditions on “back wards” with a camera secured to his belt. Blatt and Kaplan then visited Connecticut’s Seaside Regional Center, a small, relatively new facility, where Kaplan openly took pictures of brightly lit wards, well-dressed residents, decorated dormitories, and education programs.

Blatt and Kaplan’s photographic exposé *Christmas in Purgatory* was published in 1966. The book depicted horribly overcrowded wards, naked and half-clothed residents, and barren rooms. Part II of the book showed the relatively positive scenes from Seaside. The back cover of *Christmas in Purgatory* included testimonials to its importance from Senator Edward Kennedy, Michigan Governor George Romney, and Minnesota Governor Karl Rolvaag.

One year later, Blatt, together with Senior Editor Charles Mangel, published a version of the exposé in *Look Magazine*, “The Tragedy and Hope of Retarded Children” (Blatt & Mangel 1967). The article began: “These children do not have to be locked up in human warehouses. Yet, to our shame, this is where we put them—in back wards, without compassion, without even basic care” (Blatt & Mangel, 1967, p. 96).

In 1967, Blatt was invited to give a keynote address at a special session of the Massachusetts Legislature convened at one of the state schools. He reviewed his findings in *Christmas in Purgatory* and urged the Commonwealth to develop a “network of small, community-centered residential facilities” (Blatt, 1970, p. 258).

When he first exposed the institutions, Blatt advocated for institutional reform. By the mid-1970s, if not earlier, he had given up hope that institutions could be reformed.

SOURCES

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Steven J. Taylor, Ph.D.

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