

## “Home Sweet Home”

The feelings attached to these words are as unique as the person hearing them. Generally though, there is agreement that the word “home” stirs feelings of warmth, welcome, and a sense of belonging in addition to a place of shelter where needs are met in a caring environment versus the word “house” – a physical place of residence providing shelter.

It was with some of these thoughts that I ventured out to visit two of

Washington State’s Residential Habilitation Centers (RHC’s) at Fircrest & Rainier in Shoreline & Buckley respectively. Having heard arguments on both sides of the debate – for & against consolidation & closure of these facilities, I wanted to see for myself and form my own opinion. “Are these institutions really homes where people live? Or are they houses where residents are placed with their basic needs met?”

I was particularly struck by the locations of both of these RHC’s. They are both on large parcels of land, beautifully landscaped in picturesque settings, yet



notably secluded from their surrounding cities and communities.

Arriving at Fircrest, I couldn’t help but notice the age of the brick buildings, the overwhelming impression - cold and impersonal. Of course the large unsightly food, laundry, and garbage carts located outside the front doors of each cottage confirmed I had indeed arrived at an institution versus a community. Rainier on the other hand reminded me of an army base or prison facility behind the gates and fences with its old-style stark white peeling paint and red Spanish tile roofs, and buildings connected by long covered walkways.



I found the facilities at each campus were clean and maintained, though they felt cold, archaic, and in great need of modern updates both inside and out. I found it peculiar that décor on both campuses looked like thrift store purchases from many years gone by, curled posters, cheaply framed faded prints, outdated curtains hung on barred windows if at all.



I appreciate the work that these residents perform: sterilizing used Comcast remotes, shredding documents, thrift store duties, and pouring beautiful paving stones. However, the biggest factor I found lacking was the sense of community. I kept pondering, “How will the public ever be able to appreciate the values of equal opportunity, full participation, independence, and economic self-sufficiency for people with developmental disabilities if they’re kept isolated and segregated? When was the last time these

adults and youths went on a vacation, went camping, saw a school play, or heard the laughter of a child?"

At Fircrest, each living room is arranged with one shared T.V. and generic "Dr's Office" chairs set around the sparsely decorated walls of the vinyl floor room. Each resident here has their own very small bedroom, meagerly furnished with a twin-size bed and dresser, sometimes a chair. Out of the dozen or more bedrooms I visited there, only a meager few appeared personalized in any way. I thought, "Even college dormitories are more appealing than this". Unfortunately nothing I observed here made me feel the least bit inclined to get comfortable and have a cup of tea anywhere – a pleasure I instinctively link to feelings of *home*.

Unexpectedly, I did observe more texture, color and variety when it came to décor and "home-like" comforts in the Rainier cottages, where 8 residents share two warmly decorated living areas per side with more comfortable furnishings, overstuffed chairs and recliners. I noted that some of the Rainier residents also share larger more personalized bedrooms, 2 to a room, comfortably furnished with warm décor. Colorful attractive home-style dinnerware adorned Rainier's tables while residents ate from standard melamine cafeteria dishes at Fircrest.

As I toured the RHC's, I kept thinking about my second daughter Jessica. When she was born with Down syndrome and cerebral palsy, I was given the choice to place her in an institution where she'd be cared for. "Would Jessica be comfortable enough to call one of these cottages *home*? Would she be happy with the lack of freedom, lack of choices and lack of independence? Would she really be safer *set apart FROM the community* in an institutional house or is she safer *IN a community home*?"

I couldn't help but feel sad and discouraged as I left these properties, wondering if the adults and youths were there willingly or if they'd ever been given a choice. Are they really at home or are they prisoners kept safe inside prettied up houses? I felt equally troubled for the families who had brought their family members to these houses. What had led them here? What choices and options were they given?



As I drove away from these campuses, I turned my heart towards the warmth of home. My heart felt lighter as I pondered my five daughters, each with her own unique abilities - her sense of

belonging, her safe place in our home where hugs abound, laughter comes easy, choices are given, freedom is earned and independence is learned. "Home Sweet Home" – these words have never meant more.



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