

Home, where they take you in, no matter your challenges

Tom Palaima, Regular Contributor

Published: 7:23 p.m. Monday, Aug. 22, 2011

'Home is the place where, when you have to go there, / They have to take you in.'

In Robert Frost's 1915 poem, "The Death of the Hired Man," the moral and practical dilemma facing a farm couple, themselves just getting by, is what to do about old Silas — we would now call him a homeless person. Silas, who has worked as a hired hand on their farm unreliably and one too many times, has returned to them worn out, addled of mind and exhausted of heart.

We face their conundrum more and more since we have abandoned New Deal and Great Society beliefs in government. How many of us have homes that will take us in, what we might call family safety nets? Extended families in multifamily houses and tightly knit neighborhoods are the stuff of old movies, of Woody Allen's "Radio Days."

The history of Austin State Hospital, operated by the Texas Department of State Health Services, reflects such trends. Opened in 1861 as the first state hospital of its kind west of the Mississippi, the original three-story building still stands, virtually unnoticeable, set back behind trees and among newer resident-care complexes at 4101 Guadalupe St.

The state hospital cared for 700 patients in the 1890s and 3,000 in the 1960s. Now it serves 300 patients as an acute care facility. It aims to treat and stabilize psychiatric illnesses in several days to a few weeks. People find themselves in ASH because they have been deemed to pose a danger to themselves or to others. While they are there, for many patients, ASH is the only home they have.

I consider myself blessed to have been inside the hospital's many units many times in the last year. Friends of mine, Lisa Laky and Pat Eberhardt, who work at Austin Travis County Integral Care, are a guitar duo known as the LPs. They regularly volunteer to perform for the hospital's patients, singing, talking with them, eating alongside them.

I jokingly call myself the LPs' roadie, helping with their equipment. But truth be told, I go along because I have found few places in Austin where people who are so innocently in need of "home" and help are treated with such humane care.

The dedicated state employees at ASH know what joy music and outside human contact bring to their patients. Torie Thiemann has worked at ASH since 1988. Now activity coordinator in the unit for longer-term patients, she explains: "If I was unable to bring people from the community in here to sing, play music or just sit and talk with some of these people, the only other people they would ever get to see is us. They rely on me to bring the world to them. The smiles and the laughter that I get each and every day are a godsend.

"Part of my job is educating the public that our patients are not a mental illness but rather human beings who happen to have a mental illness. The people we serve are deserving of our understanding and compassion. I'm truly blessed to work with all of these people and hopefully make a difference in their lives as they do in mine every single day."

Michael Dart, activity coordinator on the Children and Adolescent Unit, explains how much the ASH Volunteer Services Council and organizations like the Long Center, Round Rock Express baseball, Austin Toros basketball, Texas Stars hockey and the UT Bevo Buddy Program have done for kids.

"Children and adolescents who have earned the chance to attend these events use this opportunity as a stepping stone back into the community," he says. "These outings also provide great motivation for kids who have never been to any event in their lives, let alone sitting courtside at a UT basketball game."



Tiffany Levy has been working at ASH for seven years. Now activity coordinator for adult patients, she offers insight into the personal commitment many workers there feel.

"I started working in this field because of my nephew," Levy says. "He was diagnosed with autism at the age of 3. My heart wept for him. I realized that I could be a blessing to others and not just him by offering myself to them. I love helping people reach their full potential and a good quality of life."

Home is where they have to take you in. If you are lucky, with big and open hearts.

Palaima is professor of classics at the University of Texas at Austin; tpalaima@sbcglobal.net.

Find this article at:

 Print this page  Close

<http://www.statesman.com/opinion/home-where-they-take-you-in-no-matter-1775334.html>