

7-15-2003

Cynthia Foster interview for the Lest We Forget Collection of Oral Histories

Cynthia Foster

Jeff Moyer

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Repository Citation

Foster, C., & Moyer, J. (2003). Cynthia Foster interview for the Lest We Forget Collection of Oral Histories. .
https://corescholar.libraries.wright.edu/special_ms396/5

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CYNTHIA FOSTER

Jeff: This is Tuesday, July 15, 2003 interviewing Cynthia Foster in Akron, Ohio in this the Akron leg of the Lest We Forget project. Thank you for coming in Cynthia.

Cynthia: You're welcome.

Jeff: Tell us about what your background is in terms of state institutions.

Cynthia: My background in state institutions is limited to about three years at Youngstown Development Center. I went there in 1980 as a teaching supervisor. My responsibility was to supervise other teachers. We had some children who went to school there; and to provide some direct service teaching to some of the other residents.

Jeff: So you worked within the confines of Youngstown State Institution for three years.

Cynthia: Yes, I worked at Youngstown Development Center for three years. Primarily I was housed in what was called a central training building. It had school classrooms and a workshop and recreation areas, a pool. It's a pretty large facility. None of the residents lived in that building. They lived in cottages across the campus.

Jeff: When was that facility built?

Cynthia: It opened in 1980. So it was brand new when we went there.

Jeff: What was the nature of the teaching that you supervised?

Cynthia: We did a lot of basic skills, reading, writing, we did some prevocational stuff. Things that we knew that were going on in county board workshops in the counties in which we served so the people would have some skills to eventually leave the developmental center and go work at county boards.

Jeff: Would these people be leaving living at the developmental center as well.

Cynthia: We did both. At the time that I was there the residential services were fairly limited in that part of the state. So we did serve some folks at YDC who lived at the developmental center but went to work or to school in the community.

Jeff: Do you know how many people lived there at the time?

Cynthia: 100. It was at the beginning of—a part of Ohio's deinstitutionalization process, the larger institutions across the state were closing and there was some replacement with smaller, newer developmental centers—Youngstown was one of those.

Jeff: So the entire facility had just been opened.

Cynthia: Yes, brand new place.

Jeff: Describe what life was like there.

Cynthia: There were several buildings in which people lived. Two of them were larger but most of them had 16 residents, two people in a bedroom and then there were two smaller group home-like settings that served eight folks, mostly adults, some children.

Jeff: In the living situations people had privacy.

Cynthia: Well it was obviously congregate living if there were 16 people in a building. Typically the bedrooms were shared with one other person. There was a communal bathroom, shared living space for a living room and a dining room. There was some privacy but certainly not a lot of it.

Jeff: Did people have control of private property and personal effects—clothing?

Cynthia: Yes, people had control of their property. They brought what they wanted with them. They decorated their own rooms.

Jeff: Did you ever hear the residents speak about their feelings about living there?

Cynthia: One of the fortunate things that working at Youngstown Developmental Center at that time was that the folks who came to YDC typically came from a lesser setting, older, bigger and usually farther away from their families. So this was a change for folks that in most cases, was a change for the better.

Jeff: Did they describe their feelings about living at Youngstown?

Cynthia: Usually not verbally but people for the most part seemed to be comfortable and felt safe.

Jeff: You mention lesser situations. Do you know the nature of the environments they had come from previously?

Cynthia: Typically the folks at YDC came from the other older, larger institutions throughout Ohio, such as Apple Creek Developmental Center, Orient, Columbus.

Jeff: Cleveland.

Cynthia: Perhaps, the state had divided Ohio geographically for these newer, smaller developmental centers so most of the folks who were at YDC were from Ashtabula, Trumbull, Mahoning and Columbiana Counties who had been placed out of those counties into mostly Apple Creek and Orient.

Jeff: Did you ever hear any descriptions or antidotes about what life had been like in the institutions from which they had come?

Cynthia: We heard a lot of stories from not necessarily the residents we served but their family members.

Jeff: What did you hear?

Cynthia: In almost all cases the family members were very pleased with the services that folks were getting at YDC on several levels. One is that it was new, the staff were new, we were enthusiastic, most of us were very young and also that it enabled families more of an opportunity to visit with their son or daughter, sister or brother because they were physically closer to the family home and that made a significant difference to a lot of people.

Jeff: What sort of stories had you heard about where they had come from?

Cynthia: A lot of the stories were based on families feeling desperate at the time that they placed their family member in an institution. There were not other choices. There seemed to be a lot of relief for the folks that we served that there was finally someplace else that their family member could go other than a big old impersonal institution.

Jeff: Didn't your specific antidotes about what had happened, the treatment, the punishment, the abuse ?? anything of that sort.

Cynthia: The kind of historic things that I heard were the stories that everyone was sharing— people not having clothes, people not having personal possessions. I don't remember any body specifically telling me about punishment. But I remember more stories of uncaring and neglect.

Jeff: Uncaring on behalf of the staff.

Cynthia: To the residents, yes.

Jeff: Neglect in what way.

Cynthia: The neglect kind of things that I remember being told by families was a lot of ignoring of residents. I remember a mom specifically telling me that she had gone every week to visit her daughter at Apple Creek and her daughter had been there for 20 years. Every week mom would walk in and the same resident not the daughter but one of the housemates of the daughter was sitting cross legged bent over on a couch every time that she saw her. In all these visits that lady said that she'd never seen anybody interact with this woman. Those were the kinds of things that were shared with me.

Jeff: In the setting did you work in Youngstown Developmental Center did you see a change in people's personalities, abilities, did you see growth?

Cynthia: We saw a lot of growth at YDC. One of the first fellows I remember in my classroom didn't walk and there was no physical reason, no medical reason for him not to walk. We had this very dedicated, enthusiastic PT staff who decided that if Richard could walk he was going to and he did. He didn't have any reason to walk at the old institution. There was nowhere to go. But here we had different buildings to go to, you could go visit different people, you could go out in the community. It's a whole lot more fun if you go to the mall and you can walk around and shop.

Jeff: Did you see an increase in family interaction with the better circumstances?

Cynthia: I believe there was. Since I didn't have a prior history when they lived in the larger institutions I couldn't really compare it but my understanding was the one thing about geography prohibited people from visiting. I'm guessing for a lot of those people it did make a difference to be physically closer to their families.

Jeff: With the change in the law and the services ?? a more community-based model what have you seen in terms of the evolution of opportunities for people since you worked there the last 20 years?

Cynthia: There's been tremendous growth in opportunities for folks with mental retardation in the community. Back in the early '80s when I was working at YDC there were not residential alternatives for folks who could not live in their family home. Their choice for the most part was to go to a developmental center if they wanted or needed residential services. That's no longer the case. Even though there are more people who want residential services than there are services available there's a choice there now and there wasn't before. One other thing about the community that I think has changed is that the rest of the service delivery system not just the MRDD but the community has changed. We can access doctors that we didn't use to be able to access. We can go out in the community with folks who have mental retardation and they're accepted at the grocery store, at the mall, at the theater, at the baseball game. Those kinds of opportunities weren't present for folks 20-30 years ago.

Jeff: Are you currently involved in this field?

Cynthia: I work for the Summit County Board of Mental Retardation. I'm the manager for the residential department.

Jeff: What sort of opportunities are available today that you manage?

Cynthia: The Summit County Board doesn't directly provide any residential supports. We contract with agencies who do. We have group homes, foster homes, intermediate care facilities for mentally retarded, semi-independent living.

Jeff: In the categories can you describe what the range of opportunities are? ??Live together, where the houses or apartments or homes are?

Cynthia: Their houses, apartments and homes are all over Summit County. The least restrictive is probably semi-independent living. Those folks tend to live in their own apartments with or without a roommate depending on what they chose and the amount of support that they get from residential staff is based on what they need. It can be as little as once a month making sure that you got all your bills paid and you've done all the appointments that you need to do. Or to once a day to make sure that you've got groceries in the refrigerator and that your apartment is safe. We have foster care providers in this county. Typically that's the most home-like. One or two folks typically live in a foster home. The foster parents are there 24 hours a day if that's what's needed and that operates most like a family home.. After awhile it's just one big group. Group

homes also vary in size. It's most typical that we have four people in a group home, 24 hour supervision. Typically those are shift staff. Again assistance is provided at whatever level the person needs. A lot of activities of daily living, ? training, a lot of socialization, therapies if they need that. Probably our most restrictive alternative in this county is intermediate care facility for mentally retarded. Again that's 24 hour staff and typically provides more medical support than another group home would do, on-site nursing, that kind of thing.

Jeff: Do you have a large number of people living here.

Cynthia: Yes, there can be more people in an ICF than in a group home. ICFs can have usually about eight.

Jeff: Given the evolution of community based on curves and the range of services you describe would anyone be better served in an institution than in the community today?

Cynthia: I wrestle with that question. At the time that I worked at Youngstown Developmental Center I believed that we provided good services to folks who couldn't get it elsewhere. That was 20 years ago. I don't know that that is true any more. Or I haven't met the person yet who can't be supported in the community and would still need an institutional setting.

Jeff: That's quite a statement. The expectations and the behaviors that were created by aggregate settings particularly the older crowded institutions the behavioral labels that followed people, have you seen situations where they no longer apply accurately because in community living people are able to demonstrate different kinds of behaviors because they no longer have the same environmental stimulus they had.

Cynthia: My experience has been that a lot of the behaviors that occurred in institutions occurred because of where people were living. It was crowded; it was noisy; it wasn't always clean. There wasn't always a lot to do. So you behaved either to keep yourself entertained or to have something to do or you acted out because somebody was right on top of you all the time and you had no space. Maybe you were angry because there wasn't anybody paying attention to you. My personal experiences that I've seen significant behavior changes when people are supported in a more realistic environment where they're able to have some privacy, where they're able to chose what they want to do, where they have options of coming and going. I have to think that at least some of that has to do with the change in the structure from an institution to a community-based setting.

Jeff: The perspective that you have spans 23 years. If you were to make one statement that would be heard by the legislature that would have to do with regulations and budgets continuing to progress with community inclusion as opposed to putting the funds into institutional settings what one thing would you want them to hear that might change their thinking?

Cynthia: I think the MRDD service delivery system is able and willing to provide supports to people in the least restrictive alternative. That's what I've heard our department say is their philosophy for more than 20 years. In order to do that the resources need to be released to the community so we can provide supports to the people that they need here where they can live.

Jeff: With proper supports do you believe that people can achieve their greatest potential and blend successfully with the community?

Cynthia: Yes, I do. I believe that people can blend into the community with the proper supports.

Jeff: Do you have anything else that you would like to add?

Cynthia: No, I think we need to be realistic.

Jeff: Realistic will take care of itself.

Cynthia: I hope so.

Jeff: I think if you had told me in the late '60s when my brother was living in his prisons that we would be at this point today I wouldn't have believed you. I wouldn't have believed it in 1981. I wouldn't have believed it in 1991. We've come a very long way and I thank you for your good news toward that progress.

Cynthia: You're very welcome, thank you guys for doing this. I think it's a wonderful thing and it gives the folks who lived it some validity. They've the ones who lived it.

Jeff: The story must be told.