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## Paul Davis: Donations needed to honor Bryce patients

By Paul Davis

*Hardly a month goes by in which I do not receive an e-mail message from someone searching for a loved one who spent their last days at Bryce hospital, a facility in Tuscaloosa, which for more than a century has housed, or perhaps I should say warehoused, Alabama's mentally ill citizens.*

Hardly a month goes by in which I do not receive an e-mail message from someone searching for a loved one who spent their last days at Bryce hospital, a facility in Tuscaloosa, which for more than a century has housed, or perhaps I should say warehoused, Alabama's mentally ill citizens.

For most of those years, those individuals merely withered away in steamy hot wards with little if any real medical treatment. That situation changed with a sweeping mandate handed down by federal Judge Frank Johnson.

It was estimated, at that time, that staffing up to meet the court order would cost the state hundreds of millions. The state tried to outfox the wise old judge. If the hospital's population were reduced, the staffing ratio would not be so staggering. They put in place a plan to move as many patients as humanly possible back into their communities. That transition has been going on for more than 30 years. Today, Bryce hospital has a population of less than 400 and that figure is going to be further reduced in the near future.

Judge Johnson had ordered that the mentally ill be placed in what he called "the least restricted alternative." And that led to the creation across the state of a wide network of mental health centers and halfway houses, all being operated at less cost and providing more humane care for our ill friends, relatives and neighbors.

For many years there was a great stigma associated with having a relative in a mental institution. Some of that still exists today. Many of those individuals at Bryce died alone and were buried somewhere on the Bryce property. It had several cemeteries. Some for blacks, some for whites and some for babies. Most were buried under a cast-iron marker shaped like a clover and bearing just a number, never a name. They suffered indignity all the way to the grave. They were "things," not people.

A panel was set up a couple of years ago to try to make this right. That group was handled by Dr. Tom Hobbs of Birmingham. I was honored to be chosen to sit with him on the panel, which was designed to remember all those forgotten souls and also find a way to preserve the old main building at Bryce as a testament of both the good and the bad which had taken place inside those walls.

Dr. Hobbs is spearheading the drive to develop a memorial on the cemetery site, sort of a spot where

family members can gather. My bride and I are doubly honored to have made the first contribution to the Memorial Park. Now you can, too. A statewide campaign is under way to raise the needed funds. The campaign is a fitting way to honor relatives who died and were buried there.

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