The Deinstitutionalization of Nicholas Romeo

His case changed the fate of the retarded.

BY JOI:
LIEK

MAY 27, 1984

The Philadelphia Inquirer Magazine

THE FAST-LANE LIVES OF CAR RACERS' WIVES (OR, LOVE IN THE PITS)

The Deinstitutionalization of Nicholas Romeo

His case changed the fate of the retarded.

BY JOI:
LIEK

MAY 27, 1984

The Philadelphia Inquirer Magazine

THE FAST-LANE LIVES OF CAR RACERS' WIVES (OR, LOVE IN THE PITS)
Nicholas Romeo forced changes in the way the retarded are treated that he himself can't begin to understand, and which are still going on.

BY JOHN WOESTENDIEK

HE WERE A STRANGE BUT familiar sight walking hand in hand down the streets of South Philadelphia — Frank Romeo, the burly shipfitter, setting a steady heel-to-toe pace, and his retarded son, Nick, a gangly 26-year-old with a gait that was the opposite, toe-to-heel.

Frank knew most everybody in the neighborhood, so they'd stop a lot, popping into Claudio's, a cheese shop on Ninth Street where Nick had a habit of grabbing olives from a big jar on the counter, or into Pasilli's, a bar on Passyunk Avenue where the men would talk sports and Nick would drink sodas and dance to the jukebox.

Nick was always dancing, or jogging, or jumping up and down, always headed somewhere or doing something — a perpetual child in perpetual motion. Except for the two, maybe three hours a night he slept, there was no end to his curiosity, or his energy.

For 26 years, they had listened to doctors and social workers and friends tell them Nick should be "put away." Each time, it was like a slap in the face. "You put away your socks, not your only son. When a family friend brought him to the funeral home, he grabbed one of his father's beefy hands, folded neatly on top of his best suit, and tried to tug him from the casket so they could go for a walk, or fishing, or paddle-boating, like they always did.

In the days that followed, Nick, his brown eyes bouncing back and forth between looks of anger, frustration and fear, would run from room to room of the rowhouse, groaning when he couldn't find his father. He would grab his mother's hand, pull her out of the house and lead her to all the places Frank had taken him.

Each day, he grew more agitated. He got fevers. He screamed, and broke things. He kicked and slapped, bit his hand and banged his head against the wall — things he had done only once in a while in the past, probably, his mother always figured, because he had no way to express himself. Now, though, he was doing them more frequently and more fiercely, and Frank Romeo wasn't there to

continued on Page 20

PHOTOGRAPHY BY APRIL SADIL INQUIRER

Romero, who is profoundly retarded and has never learned to speak, rests on the sofa of his mother's home in South Philadelphia at his 35th birthday party in January. Nick lived with his parents for 26 years, but when his father died, he was placed in Pennhurst. He spent nine years there, tied to a bed or chair for more than 7,500 hours. Now he lives in a group home in Northeast Philadelphia and attends a workshop, where he receives physical therapy and vocational training.
Here was Romeo, of Supreme Court fame, Pennhurst’s most-watched resident, with 50 fresh welts on his back, chest and buttocks — all in the shape of a toilet bowl brush.

PHILADELPHIA

July 11, 1984

In the late 19th century, conditions at the mental homes were so deplorable that a Supreme Court judge, John麦考密克 said, “The treatment is so inhuman that it is like a witch’s sabbath.”

And in the early 20th century, a Pennsylvania state senator, Lilla Thurston, said, “You are lucky if you get a sick bed, a place to lie in the sun; you are dead if you don’t.”

So was the history of the mentally disabled in America. And the history of Pennhurst State School for the Retarded, the institution in which Paul and Frank Romeo were held, was the history of how America treated its mentally disabled.

Pennhurst was one of the first mental hospitals in the United States, opened in 1808. It was built to hold 600 patients and was called the Pennsylvania Board of Industry, a name that suggested a place of refuge.

But it was not a place of refuge. It was a place of torment, where the mentally disabled were locked away in a place of darkness and despair.

And it was not just Paul and Frank. It was thousands of other mentally disabled people, like them, who were held in Pennhurst and other mental hospitals across the country.

The mentally disabled were seen as a threat to society. They were seen as dangerous, as a danger to themselves and to others.

And so they were locked away, in places like Pennhurst, or in institutions like them, to protect society.

But it was not protection. It was torture. It was abuse. It was neglect.

And it was not just the mentally disabled. It was their families, too. They were locked away in these institutions, too, to protect society.

But it was not protection. It was isolation. It was loneliness. It was neglect.

And it was not just the mentally disabled. It was their families, too.

So was the history of Pennhurst and the mentally disabled. And it was a history of abuse, of neglect, of isolation.

But it was not just the mentally disabled. It was their families, too.

So was the history of Pennhurst and the mentally disabled.
At the meeting, Pennhurst officials informed Nicholas that a new behavior modification program had been started. The program included daily punishment for the Nick's behavior, with the goal of changing his behavior. Nicholas was placed in a group home for mentally retarded children, where he was subjected to daily punishment. The program was designed to change his behavior, and Nicholas was expected to be released from the facility once he had completed the program.

The testimony of Fels and other experts would not be allowed. "All we could do was to show that he had a right to be free from unnecessary restrictions, and that the appeals court was correct in saying that every individual is entitled to be free from unnecessary restrictions," Fels said.

Nicholas was eventually released from the facility, and he continued to live at the group home. The case was settled in 1978, and Nicholas received a settlement of $400,000. The case was considered a landmark case in the area of mental retardation, and it helped to establish the rights of individuals with mental retardation.
Hitting himself and the Halderman cases.

Distinct difference was so much animosity him."

Here comes Mrs. Romeo, who

Nicky's toilet brush injuries, his orhtopedic combat boots,

During his last three days at the institution, Nick was under a 24-hour watch by state police.

On April 4, 1983, Nicholas Rome,

Some of these injuries.

herof, who lived in Nicholas's room, under police secret, walked out of Penhurst.

Some of those injuries.

About getting away with it. There are more than a dozen of injuries written in the walls of Nick's cell. He was watched by a lot of employees. When Nick signed. He was watched by a lot of employees.

It was unbelievable. It was his own doing.

hurt Nicholas Romeo and get away with it. There are more than a dozen of injuries written in the walls of Nick's cell. He was watched by a lot of employees. When Nick signed. He was watched by a lot of employees.

Nick's good behavior has been noticed. It was rough for the first few weeks. It was rough for the first few weeks.

There were a couple dozen of injuries.

There are so much animosity him."

Ralph, who lived in Nicholas's room, under police secret, walked out of Penhurst.

Without words, Nicholas Romeo,

Staff report Nick's story has shown that the Pennsylvania Supreme Court and the community.

Opponents point with fear to the Pennsylvania Supreme Court and the community.

without shackles.

Retarded people have a right to live - without shackles.

It was rough for the first few weeks. It was rough for the first few weeks.

Without words, Nicholas Romeo,

It was rough for the first few weeks. It was rough for the first few weeks.

To hear more about how Nick in the Penhurst community.

Without words, Nicholas Romeo,

Without words, Nicholas Romeo,