

Fears linger decades after abuse in state institutions

by [Deborah Holtz](#) // February 10th, 2011

This is an interview with my friend, J.J. He prefers to remain anonymous because “someone might find me and beat me up for saying things.”

J.J. was sent to live at Faribault State Hospital in 1934, when he was five years old. He will celebrate his 82nd birthday in a couple of months. Many children were sent to state hospitals during the Great Depression. Some children didn't have severe disabilities but had families that could not afford to care for them. J.J. most likely came from the latter.

J.J. lived in the state hospital until he was almost 50 years old. Since then he has lived in large group homes, smaller places, and his own apartment with support services.



This isn't an article about the conditions of the state hospital or a statement about any other systems. It is simply an interview about someone who has lived through many difficult challenges in his life, and is still lives. In 1955, at the height of the worst times, when J.J. still lived there Faribault State Hospital had a census of 3,355 residents.

He now lives with three other men in a house in a beautiful neighborhood, with staff through the home and a community-based waiver. The manager of this house

is one of the best I have seen in my 30-plus years of working in this field. By all accounts, this should be a success story. And in many ways it is. But if you listen closely, you will still hear the loneliness at times of J.J.'s life. He raises questions for us to think about in terms of what quality of life really means.

I met J.J. in 1983, and he soon became a part of our family, as he had done with a few other people. He agreed to be interviewed to give people an idea of what his life has been like for him, and the changes he has seen since 1934. Many of his answers made me think about the quality assurance system we think we are designing for people with developmental disabilities.

AP: Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed. You went to Faribault State Hospital a very long time ago. Do you remember how old you were when you were sent to the hospital?

JJ: I was 5 years old.

AP: That is very little. Do you remember things?

JJ: Yes, I do. I got beat up a lot. When I got older, I had to take care of the little kids. I had to do a lot of work. I still got beat up. I don't know why. Sometimes we got hosed down for showers. They didn't treat me nice.

AP: What was life like for you?

JJ: Well, everybody told you when to do things. They told you when to eat and get up and go to bed. And you couldn't see the girls. We lived in a different building. And they didn't tell me things. I didn't know my mom and dad died until I left the state hospital. Why didn't they tell me?

AP: Do you remember when you left the state hospital?

JJ: Yes I do. It was in 1986. (Interviewer's note—it was probably the late 1970s or very early 1980. The author met J.J. in 1983 when he was already living in the community in his own apartment with some support services.)

AP: What did it feel like the day you left the state hospital?

JJ: It was heaven. (The largest smile ever seen.)

AP: After your release from the state hospital, you lived in many different places. You lived in a large group home, and then a smaller place, and then your own apartment with some supports, and then last year, you moved to a very small house with three other men, right?

JJ: Yes, but I don't see you very much anymore!

AP: Is there anything more you want people to know about all the places you have lived?

JJ: Well, yes. You have to make your own choices. I don't want people to tell me what to do. But I get lonely and I wish more people would come to visit me.

Deborah Holtz is filling in for regular History Note writer Luther Granquist.