

Brandon Training School memorial honors a complex social legacy

By LEE J. KAHRIS

BRANDON—Twenty years after the closing of the Brandon Training School, over 100 people gathered in Pine Hill Cemetery on Sept. 13 to remember residents who have passed and reflect on the legacy of the controversial institution.

Just to the right of the cemetery entrance are six rows of small headstones where 88 former residents and employees of the Training School have been laid to rest.

Despite a biting wind and steady light rain, the mood on Friday was cheerful and celebratory as the Remembrance Day event drew former employees and residents for an unveiling of a monument memorializing those who are interred there. Some came in wheelchairs, some were using sign language, other were quietly rocking in their seats. Bill Ashe, Director of Upper Valley Services, and Tony Mason-Sherwood played live music under a tent nearby, the sound of blues wafted into the crowd. Squeals of delight were heard as former residents and staff members reconnected for the first time in years. There were a lot of smiles and a lot of hugs.

State Developmental Disabilities Supported Employment Services Coordinator Jennie Masterson helped organize last Friday's remembrance.

"Everyone wants to be loved, recognized, included and be able to lead their lives. For me, there is a deep and abiding respect for those who've gone before us and I hope that the values of Vermont are retained in whatever the future holds."

— Sherry Thrall

"The size of this crowd is a clear sign the people who rest in this spot are remembered," she said in her remarks. "Please never underestimate the difference you made in someone's life."

Prior to the ceremony, Masterson said the work group formed to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the school's closing thought having a social gathering to commemorate those who have passed would create a great atmosphere.

"I think the tone we want to set is a recognition of history," she said. "We're not going to cast judgment because people had many varied and different experiences. But in 1993, it really was time to help people get back into their communities and honor their civil right to be able to live in Vermont's communities."

The Brandon Training School was established in 1915 in the area now known as Park Village to house the developmentally disabled who could no longer be cared for by their families. There was a work component designed to teach the residents basic

tasks, and the school evolved into a fully self-sufficient facility as a working farm with dairy cows, extensive vegetable gardens, a sugar house, bakery, and laundry facility.

The facility had not only provided a safe place for over 2,000 of the state's most developmentally disabled residents, but employed many area residents with steady jobs over the course of its 78 years in existence.

In 1993, the state decided to close the facility and the remaining 200 residents were relocated, many with local Brandon residents who had been Training School employees.

It was a bittersweet event and a turning point for Brandon, as well as the residents, some of whom had mixed feelings about their experiences at the school. Some complained of the institutional nature and conditions as the school, others charged certain staff members with abuse. Many argue that was a difficult but necessary facility and helped advance the cause of mainstreaming the mentally disabled.

There were a number of speakers at the remembrance, including former Training School resident Christine Lamphere. Now in her 60s, Lamphere lived at the training school after graduating from Hartford High School.

"I found it was good and I found it was bad," she said. "We didn't have access to our clothes when we wanted and we didn't have privacy. I slept in a ward with 30 other people, so it was kind of hard. It was bittersweet for me, but I got what I needed."

Lamphere said she left the school and moved into Brandon and got on with her life.

"I married a guy from Brandon, the love of my life, Richard Lamphere," she said with a big smile.

Sherry Thrall, Executive Director of Lincoln Street Inc. Developmental Disability Services in Springfield, unveiled the headstone marking the rows of Brandon Training School graves. The inscription reads, "To live in hearts we leave behind is not to die. In loving remembrance for all who lived at the Brandon Training School, 1915-1993. Dedicated September 13, 2012."

Thrall said she arrived at the cemetery early to walk amongst the gravestones and reflect.

"I visited old friends I haven't seen in a while," she said. "I still think of them with gratitude."

Bill Ashe wrote a song specifically for the remembrance and played it for those gathered. Below are the lyrics to "This Day in September," which Ashe said was written from the perspective of the inhabitant of at least one grave, where the identity of the deceased is unknown.

"This Day in September"
By William Ashe

I have been here for so many years

I have been here without shedding tears

Me and my friend waiting for someone to remember

But finally you're here on this day in September

Chorus 1

I lived my life behind walls cold and gray

In a place where I never wanted to stay

After years in this cold damp earth

Today with you here I have had a rebirth

Everyone needs to know they are loved and remembered

For me today is that day — this day in September

Chorus 1

I lived my life behind walls cold and gray

In a place where I never wanted to stay

Ending

I have been here for so many years

I have been here without shedding tears

I have been here for so many years

Chorus 2

I wanted to live with family and friends

But here I died, lived my life here til the end

I have been waiting here with close and fine friends

They too had live here until the very end

So today without tears we celebrate

Please don't forget us, know that it is never too late

In Loving Memory...

Over 100 people gathered in Pine Hill Cemetery on Sept. 13 for a memorial to the 88 residents and former staffers of the former Brandon Training School that are buried there. Clockwise, from top left, Sherry Thrall, center, unveils the new marker to commemorate the 88 graves behind her; Renee Pellerin, in hat, reads his interpreter Rachael Bol's signing during the ceremony; Bill Ashe performs a song he wrote called "This Day in September" to commemorate the occasion; Gary Stanley of Miller & Ketcham Funeral Home in Brandon says a few words; Eileen Mulcahy, daughter of Brandon Training School Superintendent Raymond Mulcahy, recalls growing up at the facility in Brandon; Former Training School resident Christine Lamphere, left, with her caregiver was all smiles at the ceremony.

Photos by Lee Kahrs

