

The following story has been contributed by Dr. Merri Jamieson. This is a personal story written about her friend Irene.

We would like to thank Dr. Jamieson for sharing her story about Irene .

For many years I drove to Partlow State School and Hospital in Tuscaloosa, Alabama to pick up Irene for Sunday Services at University Presbyterian Church. She had lived at the institution since she was 8 years old. She and her two siblings who had epilepsy were sent to Partlow when both parents died. The other five siblings were adopted by relatives and lived in communities throughout Alabama.

Irene had a strong faith. She had attended the chapel services at Partlow for 50 years. Irene helped raise several generations of children at Partlow and always imparted her faith and the love of God.

One Sunday the minister announced that there were unexpected problems with the church roof. The cost to fix the problems would be thousands of dollars. The congregation was asked to assist with the needed funding.

The next week I picked up Irene and we sat in our usual place in the sanctuary. During the offering, Irene opened a paper bag and pulled out a piggy bank. When the offering plate passed through our row, Irene put the piggy bank onto the plate. She leaned over and whispered matter-of-factly, "That is for the roof."

I knew that the money was the only money Irene was allowed to control.

At the time Partlow State School and Hospital was declared an unfit place to live. Many people like Irene were told that they had to find other accommodations. This was called deinstitutionalization, a word that is insufficient to describe a process that later was under investigation as hundreds of people were lost in the "system". Investigators were employed to locate past residents. Some died for lack of supervision, medication errors, poor or no housing, etc.

Irene was not retarded or mentally ill, according to the new guidelines. None of Irene's relatives would take her, including her brother who was a minister in a Presbyterian Church. None had come when Irene invited them to be a witness when she joined the church.

Irene took all the classes to prepare her to "live on the outside". She passed each and was assigned to live with a small group of past residents in a group home. She had asked to live with her brother, also deinstitutionalized; however, there was a rule that relatives could not live together if both had lived at Partlow.

After a couple of weeks, Irene stopped taking her medicine and was returned to Partlow for further instruction about her health needs. Again, placed in a group home, Irene stopped taking her medicine. This happened four times before anyone asked Irene why she stopped taking the medicine. Irene replied "I grew up at Partlow. Partlow is my home. I raised many of the people here. I am responsible for them. I don't want to move. "

Finally, a plan was written for Irene to have success in a group home. She wanted to be on a bus line so she could return to visit Partlow. She wanted to be able to walk to her church. She wanted a job working with children. She wanted only one roommate.

Once these conditions were met, Irene became a part of the community near the University of Tuscaloosa. She had a job working with small children who had disabilities who were in a university grant research project. She walked to church and visited with the pastor. She walked to her bank, grocery store, downtown, park, etc. as the need/desire arose. She hopped on the bus when she wanted to visit her friends at Partlow. She moved from the group home to an apartment with one roommate.

Irene never stopped taking her medication again. In records at Partlow it was written that Irene was successfully deinstitutionalized. On the streets of Tuscaloosa, in the preschool, and at church, Irene belonged.