

## **Memories of a Former Resident of Laconia State School, Roberta Gallant**

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I was born on May 4, 1951 in Berlin, New Hampshire. During my birth, the umbilical cord wrapped around my neck, causing me not to have enough oxygen going to my brain. As a result, my brain did not develop properly. My sister Jocelyn was born on September 1, 1952. Five days after her birth, she developed a blood clot in her brain. A doctor diagnosed both of us with significant disabilities.

On October 27, 1956, Mom and Dad admitted my sister, Jocelyn, and me to the Laconia State School and Training Center. Jocelyn and I were 4 and 5 years old respectively. In the 1950s and early 1960s, parents frequently placed their children with disabilities in institutions. Every State in America had a residential institution for people with mental retardation and other significant disabilities. The Laconia State School and Training Center was the institution in New Hampshire. My parents, like many others, did not have the knowledge and skills to take care of their own children. They already had two sons and one infant daughter and money was tight.

Going to the Laconia State School and Training Center was very difficult for Jocelyn and me. We hated leaving our home in Berlin. Jocelyn and I never imagined that our parents would leave us at the Laconia State School the way they did. I was afraid that people at the institution would injure me. Our parents abandoned us. They did not come to visit or take us home very often. We were extremely homesick. I constantly sobbed and threw severe temper tantrums. Jocelyn and I were so angry with our parents because they were seldom with us. Our parents left us with strangers at Laconia State School.

Some of the attendants and residents at the Laconia State School sexually, verbally, emotionally, and physically abused and assaulted me. The staff said that they did this to me because I misbehaved or acted "silly." The attendants and residents there hit and kicked me with their hands and feet. They pulled my hair, whipped me with wooden or metal coat hangers, wet towels, hairbrushes, mop-and-broom handles, hard leather belts, straps, rulers, and yardsticks, stainless steel serving utensils, and clothes. Additionally, they bullied me by laughing at me and calling me names. They spat at me, bit and pinched my arms and other body parts causing me pain. The employees and supervisors at the institution threw buckets of cold water on my body-clothes and all. They did this to me because I was acting out physically and aggressively. They said that the cold water would calm me down. They put me into straitjackets for acting out violently to other people or to myself. Sometimes, I watched the attendants do the same things to the other residents. These residents screamed and cried.

I picked up weird habits from many residents. I picked my nose, sneezed and coughed without turning my head and covering my mouth, stuck pencil-and-ink pen tips in my ear canals, burped and broke wind without excusing myself, put things into my mouth, jumped up and down, stood on furniture pieces: couches, chairs, and tables, pulled hair out from my head, and played with myself. The staff punished me by slapping my face and shoving me up against walls.

The employees, supervisors, and residents always took advantage of me for my money and snack-food items. They stole my belongings including: my clothes and footwear, prayer beads, a harmonica, jewelry, money, toys, ink pens, pencils, crayons, and coloring books. Mom and Dad and some of the attendants gave me these items for Christmas. I also bought myself some items with money my parents sent me for Christmas. Jocelyn had the same types of abusive experiences. When I went to the administration office and filed complaints, no one helped me.

When I was about 12 years old, I started working at the Laconia State School. I worked in different dormitories: King, Murphy, Powell, Keyes, and Duby buildings. My daily tasks were changing babies, feeding adults and children, sweeping and mopping floors, cleaning toilets, sinks, and windows, bagging dirty clothes, dressing adults and children, brushing, combing, braiding, and curling their hair, washing the residents' faces and hands, and brushing their teeth. I washed and dried dishes and put them back in the kitchen cupboards. I also toileted both adults and children who could not go to the bathroom on their own. For all of those tasks I performed, the Laconia State School and Training Center paid me only five cents an hour! The institution was wrong in paying me a nickel an hour. The facility should have given me a lot more money for all of the work I did.

I became very violent and aggressive toward other people at Laconia State School to defend myself and because that was the culture at the facility. I never felt good about hurting and injuring others. I changed my behavior to avoid going to prison in the community outside the Laconia State School and Training Center and to attract more friends. I felt so guilty about hurting and injuring other people around me but had to do that to defend myself. I did not want anyone to put my life at risk. Dying at a very young age would have been a terrible tragedy for my family members, relatives, and friends. If I did not hurt and injure others, they would have done that to me.

On November 13, 1979, my sister Jocelyn left the Laconia State School and Training Center and entered the community to live a better life. At that time, she was 23 years old. I knew that she had gone to the community outside Laconia State School because I was still there. Her leaving the institution before I did made me very jealous. I lived at the facility for another two years and nine months. On June 22, 1981, I left.

To reunite with Jocelyn, I called Richard's Taxi for a ride to the Concord Trailways Bus Depot. The Laconia State School and Training Center assigned me to a case manager at Lakes Region Community Services Council. The case manager found me housing, healthcare, transportation, and employment. The first place I lived was with Mr. and Mrs. Gray in Gilmanton. The Grays received money to offer former Laconia State School residents housing. I stayed there for about a few months. I left the Grays' house because the rules were too strict. For example, they made me go to bed at 9:00 pm. Next, I moved to John's\* trailer at the Inter-Lakes Mobile Park in Meredith. Moving in with John was my choice. He worked as an attendant at the Laconia State School and

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\* Not his real name.

Training Center where we became friends and lovers. After moving in with John, I stopped wanting to have sex with him. John insisted on having sex with me so I left his trailer. Before leaving his trailer, I called my case manager, Maggie, at Lakes Region Community Services Council and asked her for other housing. She helped me find the transitional apartments on 3 Riverside Court in downtown Laconia. I hated living there since many other tenants with developmental disabilities mistreated me. Simone was my roommate who swore, yelled, and threatened me frequently. We were roommates for about a year, and she moved out. Thank God!

On July 19, 1990, I moved from Laconia to Concord. Moving in to my own apartment made me feel very good. My case manager helped me move from Laconia to Concord and a staff person at the transitional apartment building assisted me in packing all of my belongings to take with me to my new apartment. I was looking forward to making the move. I wanted to live alone.

Living alone did not make me feel lonely. I made some new friends. Most of the people at the apartment complex are good to me. Sometimes we chit-chat among ourselves. I am so proud of myself for my accomplishments. I like the way I live at my apartment in Concord.

My father died while I was living at the Laconia State School and Training Center. I learned that he had passed away while living at John's trailer. I went to visit my mother at her apartment in Berlin. Mom told me that I was unable to take care of myself. She saw me as a small child even though I had become an adult. She treated my sister Jocelyn in the same way. When Jocelyn and I wanted to walk around in downtown Berlin, Mom said, "No, you may not. You are to stay right here. Do you understand?"



Roberta Gallant

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