

WESLEY DALE WHITE 1910-1978



Wesley White, past President (1969-1970) of AAMD, died on April 12, 1978, while wintering in Eustis, Florida. He would have been 68 years old on July 25. He leaves his wife of 46 years, the former Pauline Broadwell, one surviving child, Alan D., and four grandchildren. He was predeceased by a daughter, Sheila. Wes White's long career in the field of mental retardation brought him to national prominence at a time when this field was experiencing its greatest growth and change. He was known to virtually all of our national leaders and hundreds of those near-anonymous workers who do the important day-to-day work, people whom Wes White loved for their dedication and humanism. And, except for his family, he will be

The author is grateful to Frank Giliberty, Peter Polloni, Bert Schmickel, John Smith, and others who shared their reminiscences with him and especially grateful to Pauline White for her extremely generous help during this difficult time in her life.

missed most by the countless clients he served so well and knew as his friends.

Born in Watertown, New York, Wes White spent his growing years in that area, later preparing himself for a teaching career at the then Oswego State Normal School, Buffalo State, and Albany Teachers' College. In 1952, he was awarded the Doctorate in Special Education at Teacher's College, Columbia University, one of the first people ever to earn that specialized degree. But all during those undergraduate and graduate years, Wes White was first a teacher, beginning at the age of 20 in a rural one-room school in Dexter, New York. From Dexter he moved to a head teacher's position in Mount Vernon, New York, and, before going off to war, he accepted the principalship at the Central School in Sharon, Connecticut. Upon his return from the European Theater of Operations, where he served in the infantry and in the military government, Wes was called to his first important position in the field of mental retardation, Supervising Principal of the outstanding Southbury Training School. By 1951, he had been promoted to Director of Training at Southbury, which gave him responsibility for administering and supervising all programs in education, rehabilitation, and therapy.

I met Wes in 1956 or 1957, shortly after he had left Southbury to assume the superintendency at the Rainier School in Buckley, Washington. During the subsequent years, we had seen each other at the annual meetings of this Association and at other places for purposes long forgotten. We may have corresponded a few times and spoken to each other on the phone a few more times, but that was the extent of our interactions. Obviously, I did not know Wes White as well as some others knew him, but I believe I understood a great deal about him, about what he wanted to accomplish, and about what he stood for. It always seemed to me that Wes was in important places and engaged in important activities more often than others in this work. It seemed that during the 20 years we had known each other, whenever I heard his

name spoken, it was in relationship to something terribly important going on and in the context of something good happening for people.

As I think about this man and what he meant to us and the larger society, and as I read through the reminiscences solicited from several of Wes's closest friends and collaborators, I think about Halifax's famous remark: "Ignorance causes a man to join a party and shame prevents him from leaving it." Wes White's life suggests that Halifax did not go far enough. He might have said, "Only the courageous dare to change their party, especially the party of their youth." Although Wes was *always* one of the most positive thinkers in our field, when he first began this life-long mission in mental retardation, people were taught that mentally retarded individuals were generally not able to care for their own needs or be self-sufficient and contributing members of society. Except for the most mildly afflicted, we were taught that it was good educational practice and proper humanistic concern to place these people in separate educational programs (if they were school children living in a community) and in separate institutions (if their families could not care for them in their natural homes). But Wes White knew better, and for 8 years at Southbury, he helped that institution to achieve world-wide distinction. The school became a model for everything that could be growth enhancing in a state school. But in spite of what most of us learned as young students of that time, Wes White had the wisdom and conviction not only to know better but to act better. From the beginning he believed in human educability. He never lost that certainty that everyone, *that anyone*, could change, that under certain conditions even the most severely retarded persons would learn important things to improve their situations.

In 1947, Southbury was already recognized as a special environment that was smaller than the others, cleaner, more home-like, and more natural. Clearly, Southbury was not like the then popular large traditional institution; but its mission put Southbury truly ahead of its time. In 1947, the Southbury Training School was

not only the best residential facility that a generous society could create for its mentally retarded citizens, but in many respects it was a vision of what was later to sweep the land and a guide for those few who chose to be early groundbreakers. While the rest of the country was concerned with "bigness"—bigger institutions, bigger institutional budgets, bigger management, bigger problems—in 1947, the Southbury Training School practiced a philosophy of individualization, of decent care, and—liberal for that time—of selective deinstitutionalization. It pioneered in small home-like cottage living, good school programs that included adult education and provisions for very limited residents. And along with his participation in all of the above, Wes himself created a unique program to prepare teachers of trainable mentally retarded students, one which I later directed as a young professor at Southern Connecticut State College. The mid-50s was a time for building decent institutional environments for mentally retarded persons, and hardly anyone ever contributed more than Wes White to that cause. Consequently, it was inevitable that he would be called to accept even greater responsibilities. In 1955, he embarked upon 6 very productive years as Superintendent at Rainier; in 1961, he assumed the highest state position in the field, as Chief of the Division of Retardation for Colorado, where he served with distinction for 8 years. He later became Superintendent of the Monson State Hospital in Massachusetts and the Pennhurst and White Haven Centers in Pennsylvania.

From his early years in Colorado on, Wes was convinced that it was time for alternatives to institutions. During the decade of deinstitutionalization, Wes White was one of our first leaders to recognize the necessity to build community-based services and, indeed, he was responsible for the creation of 23 community centers established in Colorado during his tenure there. And by the time he retired from White Haven in 1975, Wes was in the midst of a community conversion program.

A flood of letters has come to me, each indicating the sterling character, the cour-

age, and devotion of this great pioneer in the field. Everywhere, he was known as an honest, hard-working man who made many sacrifices for those who were unable to speak for themselves. His zest for life and his personal integrity enabled him to attract outstanding colleagues and, indeed, to train and encourage others to themselves become leaders in the field. Wes White was a fighter on behalf of not only retarded citizens everywhere but on behalf of all people who are unable to fight for themselves. He was one of the most courageous people I knew and yet one of the gentlest. He was a battler for the weak, but forgave the enemies of the weak. And because he never hated, even those he fought were his friends.

Wes White was a member of AAMD for more than 30 years, joining the Association at a time when it was one-quarter of its current size and represented one-tenth of

its current interests and purposes. His 1970 Presidential Address at the Denver meeting concentrated on the seemingly perpetual nature/nurture controversy. His review of that relevant literature reaffirmed his long-term convictions that most mental retardation is preventable and, furthermore, if discovered at an early enough age, there are possibilities for reversing the condition, especially among those with no demonstrable central nervous system pathology.

But his belief in the concept of educability was not restricted to mentally retarded persons. Wes White lived his life as if all people could change for the better and as if all people are innately good. And in his presence, many of us tried to live up to his belief in us. We will miss you dear friend.

Burton Blatt
14 June 1978