

# the Family

by *Burton Blatt*

*Burton Blatt handed down this searing indictment of "the Family" in mental retardation as he keynoted the 1977 annual convention of the American Association on Mental Deficiency, of which he is president.*

*Dr. Blatt, now dean of the School of Education at Syracuse University, was formerly chairman of the special education department of Southern Connecticut State College. While in Connecticut he served as a member of the Mental Retardation Council.*

*"Purgatory" in the last paragraph is a reference to "Christmas in Purgatory," a book on which Dr. Blatt and Fred Finn, former superintendent of Seaside Regional Center, collaborated in the 1960s.*

This presentation is an indiscretion, and there are many who will be angry with us for committing it because no family likes its sordid side brought into public view.

The sordid side of ordinary families can remain hidden—to reveal it is often even more sordid. But there are other kinds of family—families like The Pentagon or The Nixon White House. To reveal their secrets can sometimes become not just permissible but necessary.

A family of this latter kind is the large group of men and women who have protected the hidden world of mental retardation from public scrutiny. It is a family which has—whether wittingly or unwittingly, by deception or self-deception—succeeded in preventing thousands of mentally retarded people from participating in the entitlements of their citizenship.

The Family knows things that we haven't been telling the world about. Important things, more important than the Pentagon Papers, which were about senseless war and unnatural deaths. As horrible as war is, people understand it. But the Family Papers are about senseless and unnatural lives, lives disfigured by a society which lays claim to the Declaration of Independence and the guarantee of justice for all people.

War is terrible, but explainable. What we do in the names of mental health, human services, and education is unexplainable because we do it to ourselves and not to the "enemy," and it's even more terrible because we do it to babies and don't quit our dirty work until dirt covers the evidence.

And who is this Family? It is all of those who work, or say they work, with the problems of retarded people in institutionalized settings. It is the supervisors and superintendents and commissioners. It is the professional societies such as the American Association on Mental Deficiency and the Council on Exceptional Children.

The Family includes government agencies such as the National Institute on Mental Health and the Office of Education, even groups like the Associations for Retarded Citizens.

From the attendants who show up for an impossible job every day, to prestigious professionals who often

don't show up at all, the Family consists of everyone who should know better than to permit that hidden world to continue. And the academic community, which legitimates it all by issuing so-called expertise, is also part of the Family. Many of you, our audience, are probably members, as are two of the three of us who worked on this study.

In spite of professed intentions, and ideals, and commitments to reform, the Family has acted to preserve the most abhorrent abuse of human beings. To some extent this has been done through concealment and secrecy. Ten years ago, one could visit institutions only by stealth or arm-twisting or string-pulling; 10 years ago the only photographs we could get had to be taken with a concealed camera.

The barricades of rules and restrictions are less formidable today, but they still exist. Institutions are still hard to get into, and taking photographs is still very difficult for anyone and next to impossible for most people. And the Family does not want to see publicized pictures finally obtained.

But more impenetrable and sinister than overt secrecy is the misleading publicity with which the Family defends its dominions. The hypnotic language of humanitarian concern encapsulates the victims of institutionalization and seals their world off from examination or understanding or hope.

We are used to condemning this kind of practice when we discover it somewhere else: If the Soviet Union locks up political dissidents in psychiatric hospitals on pretext of looking after their mental health, we are quick enough to protest. Yet, in our own institutions for retarded people, thousands of Americans continue to be locked up on the pretext of receiving care, training, and education, and we continue to speak as though the pretext were reality; we call for more money and resources to implement the pretext rather than confess it was all a terrible mistake.

In seeking understanding of human rights in the Soviet Union, we ask the victims, not the victimizers, for their analyses. We take the reports of the dissidents seriously and dismiss as propaganda the versions told by the state officials and state psychiatrists. But in examining institutions around us, we dismiss the opinions of the incarcerated. We turn instead to the Family—psychiatrists, social workers, educators, all the professionals—to tell us what is happening, and we accept what they say as true even when it contradicts the reports of their victims.

The Family tells us about innovative new treatments and the need for more research; it tells us that each resident is served by an individualized program in a

place where countless residents can be seen aimlessly sitting or standing or lying around; it tells us that an institution is in compliance with all sorts of Federal standards, though we see barren environments and wasted lives everywhere.

The Family discourages taking photographs and tells us that it is protecting the privacy of the residents, though the residents must live in environments in which there can be no such thing as privacy. The family talks piously about healing the wounds of the mentally retarded but has not yet stopped inflicting those wounds.

Our indiscretion is that we are making public what the Family does, not what it says. We believe with our hearts and our minds that these Family Papers are as vital for us to see as any that have been hidden during the last 200 years of this government. While they do not speak to how our society was created, they raise more crucial contemporary questions concerning how it should endure. The malaise in our culture is not because there are doubts about what we do. There is

little challenge here to the idea of America. But there are grave concerns about what we have made of America. And of ourselves.

If there is hope in what we have learned in our examination of institutionalization, it is not in any improvement of institutional life—imprisonment and segregation can be made more comfortable, but they can never be made into freedom or participation. The only hopeful sign is that, while 10 years ago and for generations before, those institutions were run by one happy family; today they are run by one unhappy family. If it must become unhappier still before it changes its ways, then we are willing to contribute to the Family's unhappiness with our report.

As we did 10 years ago, we have revealed some of America's papers, a Family's papers. We feel no guilt, because we show you papers from the guardians of a closed society which professes that any decent society should be open. As you will see, everything has changed during the decade between Purgatory and today. As you will see, nothing is changed.