

Russell Roberts

# A day in the life: South Wing

A few weeks ago, I spent a day in South Wing, the psychiatry department of Memorial Hospital. I'd never been in a psychiatric ward. I wanted to see what one looked like and, more importantly, I wanted to see if the patients conformed to the stereotypes I'd had of disturbed people. How different would they be from myself? Would I be able to talk to them? What could I learn from them?

South Wing consists of three in-patient floors of 18 beds each. The floors are laid out in double corridors of six rooms each with a day room at the front of the ward. The day room is a multi-purpose dining and relaxation room with tables, couches, a color television and a radio.

At 9 a.m., I'm sitting in the day room of 4th floor South Wing. I'm waiting for Rodney, a nurse who I will spend much of the day with. I'm nervous, very nervous. The patients sit looking straight ahead or flip through a newspaper as I am doing. But my mind isn't following the words.

I look up to see a friend of mine who works in the hospital. He is standing in the entrance to the day room with a clipboard in his hand. Our eyes travel the 20 feet between us. His register surprises, mine fear.

He thinks I'm a patient. I haven't seen him in a few weeks and he doesn't know I'm doing this for the paper. I'm ashamed, embarrassed. I spring from my chair as quickly as I can and I am standing next to

him. "What's happening," he says. "Oh," I say, as nonchalantly as I can to hide the almost panic in my voice. "I'm doing this for the *Tar Heel*." And then he understands. That was the closest I came to feeling the emotions of a patient. I spent much time in the day room, talking to patients and nurses. The atmosphere is quiet and relaxed. Many of the patients sit by themselves. For much of the conversation between patients goes on in individual rooms. The patients prefer the privacy afforded there.

A young girl sits in her room doing a crossword puzzle. She must be around 15. She loves crossword puzzles, she says, she just has trouble finishing them. I help her out on a corner, giving clues and guiding her to the right words. When I compliment her on her vocabulary she smiles proudly.

"Thank you very much," she says slowly, pronouncing the words carefully. "My teachers in high school always told me I had a good vocabulary." Ten across is a four letter printing term for "Let it stand." She finally gets it by a process of elimination. "Oh yes," she says. "I learned that word in college. I was going to be a secretary."

In a meeting, the night before my visit, the patients were told that I am a journalist. But they are still willing to talk to me. Some search for sympathy. Others complain. Some do a little of both.

A man beckons to me. "Do you want to

talk to me now?" he asks. "Because I'm going to go to bed soon. They give me some drugs and I have to go to sleep." The words come out like syrup as his body trembles slowly. "I was doing some painting and everything went wrong. I'm a painter, see. They were all yelling at me. My nerves couldn't take it. But I'm not crazy. I'm not the smartest guy in the world, but I'm not crazy. I never should have signed those papers."

He was referring to the papers of commitment. According to recently passed North Carolina laws, the hospital can initiate commitment but the final decision is made by a magistrate. Dr. Paine, the director of South Wing's in-patient service, said that the hospital prefers patients to come to them voluntarily. "We have nothing to gain by commitment," he said.

There are currently six or seven committed patients residing in South Wing. They are spread over all three floors. The door to the outside is locked due to this mixing of patients. But some patients are free to come and go as they please. Privileges vary according to the acuteness of the individual case.

The day to day life of any patient is fairly unstructured. One structured activity, however, is recreational therapy, which is urged but optional. The object of the therapy in the words of a therapist is to "let the patients have fun." On my day in the ward,

the game was volleyball.

The game borders on the spirited. A tall player with a great block shot randomly booms out the first line of a Johnny Cash song. "I can almost hear the whistle." His friends tease him. "Don't you know the rest of the song," they ask. Their comments remind me of good absurd humor.

Just before I left, I spoke again with the girl who liked crosswords, who was evidently older than she looked. She talked of how well she used to do in school. "I used to get a few 'Cs,' lots of 'Bs' and 'As' too." She talked about a paper she once did that she was particularly proud of. "You sound like you were a very good student," I said.

And again she responded slowly, proudly. "Thank you very much." Her eyes were like bright stars. "Do you have to go now?" "Yes," I said. "What was your name again?" I told her. "Well, it's been very nice meeting you," she said in her slow articulate fashion. I said goodbye.

When I left the ward at 4:30, I was physically and emotionally drained. Some of my questions had gone unanswered but mostly I felt satisfaction. I would return to classes the next day while those I had talked to would remain behind the locked door enduring the slow process of readjustment. But as Dr. Paine had told me earlier that morning, "Psychiatry isn't like surgery. It unfolds over weeks and months."



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Deb

## Letters to the editors

### Helicopter racket disturbs life's flow

To the editors: I am sure that I was not the only Chapel Hillian whose day was disturbed last week by a low-flying helicopter. The piercing, mechanical bursts of sound interrupted the natural flow of life all over campus, from the library to the tennis courts. It came as a shock to learn that the chopper was not up for any good reason. According to *The Tar Heel*, the Navy air vehicle was simply giving joy rides to prospective recruits.

Does the Navy realize that there are still people in the world who cherish what little peace is left to man, and who deplore such waste of energy? Does it realize that these people, i.e. the township of Chapel Hill, has a law against flying over town at under 1,000 feet altitude? Why wasn't the Navy pilot arrested for breaking this law? Isn't pollution, waste, the frightening of dogs, birds and children, the attacking of mental

peace, as great a crime as one can commit? If the Navy pilot and his gang are not brought to trial, then one must conclude that the laws exist only to be respected by individuals and broken by powerful corporations like the U.S. Navy.

Whitney Reed  
103 Kenan Street

### 'Obscene' freaks disturb studiers

To the editors: So what the hell is going on at the Forest Theatre, and where is the *DTH* when we need you? This is a rough time of year, and up until now streaking has been a good enough outlet for the student libido. But a few of us at Graham Dorm have seen things

that would make even Jesse Helms approve of streaking.

At approximately 1 a.m. on April 19, we were up studying when someone looked out the window and noticed that about 13 or 14 people were gathered at the top of the steps leading down to the Forest Theatre. They were all dressed in long, dark clothes and were chanting some sort of refrain. We can't repeat it here, but it would make Mick Jagger's songs sound like hymns.

Two of us went to investigate, but when we tried to join the fun, some babe who seemed to be in charge of things told us to split. We pretended to leave, but returned a few minutes later. By this time, the group had withdrawn to inner recesses of the theatre and was engaged in performing "obscene" rites (we use the word loosely).

So what's going on? Have the Hindoo freaks expanded their program, or has somebody seen *The Exorcist* too many times? If these people have their minds

blown, that is their problem, but some of us would like to study for finals.

Mavis Johnson  
Ray Stroud  
Kenny Rollman  
Robert Richie

### Christian means living and loving

To the editors:

In reference to the past few letters in the *DTH* about Christianity, I would like to comment on the position taken by the pro-Christians. I am surprised to hear that the crux of Christianity is that Christ was resurrected. As a Christian myself, I place more emphasis on the life and meaning of life Christ expressed through his teachings. If each could live the moral code he taught and express the love and respect for oneself and other people, animals and all life, that was lived by Jesus, then there would be no wars and no crime. More realistically, if each could try, it would be a nicer world for all, and I'm sure everyone's God would be pleased. It is useless to argue the fine interpretation of doctrine. Religion is something which must be felt and expressed by each individual in his own way. I suggest we allow everyone the freedom to reach his own understanding of his highest nature, and express the truth he discovers in accordance with his personal individualism. We will always see the truth of another differently, for each hears harmony by the tune he plays himself.

Dawn Vospalek  
301 Kenan

### Jane Wettach

## What is orientation?

Orientation—a word that evokes visions of meaningless activities that are arranged by some obscure student committee for the new students who arrive each fall. It evoked that image to me, too, until about six months ago when I was asked to become chairman of the Orientation Commission.

I groped for a long time trying to figure out just what it means to plan a program for 3,000 freshmen and 1,000 transfers. At the same time I was wondering why I was spending much time and energy on what I really believed to be the administration's responsibility. It was not until last week that I discovered what orientation is all about.

One night I was by myself in my room, immensely enjoying the solitude and freedom from everything except studying. About 10 p.m. the phone rang.

After some awkward introductions, I learned that the caller had transferred to UNC this past January. He remembered me from the short orientation program we had put on for the 75 new students then.

He was calling me because after being at school here for three months, he has virtually no friends. After my initial reaction of "that's not the way it's supposed to happen," I asked him to come over. Just give me a half-hour to finish the last 150 pages of Dr. Zhivago for Russian Lit tomorrow, I said.

I didn't read much more of Dr. Zhivago. Rather, I thought about orientation and how we had failed this guy and what we might have done differently so that he would not be making this disguised plea to me. To this

point orientation had meant agendas for meetings, arrangements, phone calls. I had not yet really been involved with new students on a personal level.

It wasn't difficult to understand why my caller was in his situation. An out-of-state student who rented a single room off-campus, he had not found a good way to meet people.

For freshmen, the orientation counselors will hopefully avoid situations like this one. But the transfers, who live off-campus and resent anything akin to a freshman-type program, might very easily live here without finding friends. I don't want this to happen.

We have devised a program that will hopefully work. We are asking each academic department and school to provide a transfer orientation individually. This will give the transfers an opportunity to meet some faculty and students in their department before classes start.

Although we have taken initial steps toward arranging these, the lack of time and the numbers involved make it difficult for the commission to organize everything before the end of the semester. I would request anyone interested in helping with an orientation in his department or school—students and faculty—to send his or her name and phone number to the Orientation Commission, Box 17, Student Union. Maybe if we get enough support in this, next semester's transfers won't find themselves with no friends after three months.

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