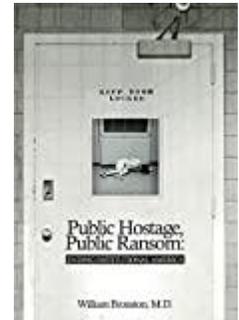


William Bronston. *Public Hostage, Public Ransom: Ending Institutional America.* Conneaut Lake: Page Publishing, 2021. Illustrations. 384 pp. \$28.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-68456-909-0.



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This autobiographical account by activist physician William Bronston meticulously traces his own journey to disability rights activism. It exposes the vast extent of human rights abuses endured over a period of five years in the 1970s by the residents of Willowbrook, a state-supported institution and the largest of its kind for children with intellectual disabilities in Staten Island, New York.

The first part of the book, “Public Hostage,” documents Bronston’s eyewitness account of the systematic human rights violations of disabled children who were institutionalized in Willowbrook. The second part, “Public Ransom,” provides the author’s analysis of the function of institutions that continue to exist and to dehumanize disabled people, albeit in different forms, in the United States today. It calls for a paradigm shift toward social justice and for access to humane care for disabled people. The book is accompanied throughout by powerful photographs taken in the 1970s as evidence to prove to the public the dehumanization taking place within the walls of Wil-

lowbrook. The photographs of injuries sustained by children at the institution as a result of gross neglect are truly shocking, as is the resistance of the institutional system, detailed by the author, against the campaign mounted by stakeholders to repair the damage done to intellectually disabled children and to provide them with equitable care.

In this truly extraordinary quest for social justice, Bronston’s powerful prose helps to amplify his own efforts and those of others who relentlessly campaigned to end institutional abuses and provide humane care to thousands of disabled children who had been unjustly “warehoused” in institutions like Willowbrook. Bronston depicts a completely dehumanized workforce; the status of workers was held merely “a fraction of an inch” above that of the residents by the administration, who “privately reviled” them, “bereft of basic resources such as soap, washcloths, diapers, and towels, with which to provide the most minimal hygiene care” (p. 50). As a result of this dehumanizing culture, residents were left to lie in their own feces. It is a powerful illustration of the impact of

budget cuts that deeply affected the provision of caregiving in an already completely deprived environment.

The author's painstaking descriptions of the shocking conditions the children were left to live in at Willowbrook represent a "total institution," as defined by Ervin Goffman in *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates* (1961), with its main purpose resting on exercising close control over the residents and leading to depersonalization through the loss of basic self-care and functioning skills as a result of institutional violence. According to Bronston's account, children in the institution were treated like animals in cages, with no real stimulus or care. Bronston's descriptions detail not only disabled children's loss of any previous life skills developed prior to institutionalization but also the utter lack of health-care services available to help keep, learn, or improve basic functioning skills for daily living. What happened at Willowbrook is reminiscent of the concept of "institutional neurosis," coined by Russell Barton (*Institutional Neurosis* [1959]) to describe the "disability" in social life skills caused directly by the demands of living in an institution. By their very nature, institutional environments cause such a disability, which Barton defined as a "disease" in which the sufferer loses interest and initiative in life and social interactions; becomes submissive; and can lose the ability to express emotions due to factors associated with the institutional environment in which residents live, such as limited access to the outside world, imposed idleness, cruelty, and malpractice.

Despite all the efforts made by concerned stakeholders, Bronston points to the abuses that still continue in current day-care systems for intellectually disabled children—evidencing the often hidden impacts of deinstitutionalization, namely, that the closure of institutions has not delivered social justice to disabled people who still live in new forms of institutions, such as nursing homes, where institutional violence persists. Newspaper

articles are included in the appendix to showcase media coverage of abuses in the 1970s and in the present.

This passionate book not only exposes the terrible conditions endured by disabled children who were institutionalized at Willowbrook but also traces how Bronston and child development leaders in the field aligned themselves with concerned parents and workers to expose and address the human rights abuses that dominated life within the institution. This led to a media exposé at local and national levels and a class action lawsuit, which ultimately helped bring about deinstitutionalization; Willowbrook closed its doors in 1987.

This important work adds to the nascent field of "sites of conscience," which primarily seeks to prevent the erasure of memories of injustices suffered by people with disabilities in institutions that were supposed to provide care for them. This ensures that injustices are kept alive in the public consciousness and therefore allows the past to be used to build a better present and future. Importantly, it helps to trace the wider histories of institutions as sites of conscience by adding the voices of those who campaigned tirelessly to right the terrible wrongs that happened within them. Bronston makes justifiable comparisons to the horrors of concentration camps in Germany before and during World War II, a comparable site of conscience to Willowbrook's. Bronston contributes important perspectives and knowledge that combine to create a more truthful presentation of the history of institutions and their aftermath. This work will certainly be of interest to those researching the social history of the disability rights movement in the US and elsewhere.

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