

# Opinion

## Texas mental health care — a one-way street

Spring breaks have been about the same for me since my junior year in high school — a week-long ritual of sun, surf, friends, beer breakfasts, 7-Eleven dinners and general mental inactivity. This year was different.

Because of a severe lack of funds among the friends, this year's expedition was called off, and instead I went

**Scott Redepening**  
Guest Columnist

the more economical route of visiting a friend from Southwestern University, whom I hadn't seen in awhile.

He was in school at this time, and was also doing a psychology internship at Austin State Hospital — one of Texas' public mental-health institutions.

It wasn't my idea of the most exciting thing to do during spring break, but I couldn't help being a little curious about what it was like in a mental hospital, so I went along with my friend.

Well, at least I tried to.

He asked permission from the hospital administrators for me to follow him around for a day to see what it was all about. Not a chance. They just smiled politely and instead offered to give me a tour of the place.

Something didn't seem right about this. Why would they go out of their way to give me a tour, when I could observe my friend's duties for a day without

bothering them at all? Somehow, I felt this tour wasn't designed to give me the whole picture, and I would walk away thinking all is well at ASH.

Well, all is not well at ASH.

I finally got in by volunteering to work on my friend's assigned ward for a couple of days. That couple of days is the closest to being in prison as I ever want to get.

I don't know why the word "health" is in mental health institution. Austin State Hospital does about as much for mental health as nuclear fallout does for hair growth. To begin with, the furniture is shoddy. But, that didn't really bother me. What bothered me is that each patient is treated like a piece of that furniture — either sat on, moved around or ignored.

The patients are on a point system. They get points for various accomplishments like good conduct, proper grooming and class attendance. When a patient is lucky enough to accumulate a certain number of points, he is afforded the great conveniences in life, like getting to visit the hospital's second-rate store. But if a patient doesn't act just how the staff wants him to he loses points.

It's the perfect system to keep the patients in line. They perform before the staff to get points as a dog would before his master to get a biscuit.

But I did find a glimmer of good in this system. It does get patients into therapy classes, and after sitting in on a few of these, I found they can help a little.

In one class, each participant drew a picture of how he sees himself and passed it on to the next person. That person would then add or subtract something from the picture depicting how he sees the original artist, and pass it on. The teacher of the class (a college intern) got one picture on which the patient had drawn himself in a gloomy setting with tears running down his face. She drew a smile over his frown, and wrote beneath, "I am a neat person."

When the patient saw this, it was as if she'd drawn the smile directly on his face. It may not have been much, but it was a great example of what one person can do for another's mental health. And all it took was a little care.

But at ASH, care is what's lacking the most. I realize most of these people have a reason to be at ASH; they're mentally disturbed. And I know they can't be given all the freedoms enjoyed by the mentally sound, but if they're ever going to become capable human beings, they must first feel like human beings. And at ASH, they just aren't given the opportunity to feel this way too often.

The problem lies at the very base of the whole system. By law, every citizen is entitled to mental health care if needed. That's why we have public hospitals like ASH — for those who can't afford private help. But what's written in the law and what's practiced in Texas are vastly different.

I learned from a Southwestern psychology professor that Texas ranks 50th among the 50 states in the quality of a public mental-health care, and after watching the staff at ASH, I didn't have much trouble believing it.

It's not that the staff members are a bunch of dictators devoted to the oppression of the patients; they just believe this system works. They're told to keep their distance from the patients, not to get involved. If a patient's condition changes, they just change his dose of drugs. It seems they think drugs alone can cure these people.

Well, it doesn't take a Ph.D. in psychology to see this just isn't true. Why not increase the patient's dose of smiles instead? Sure the drugs help, but these people need someone who will talk to them, someone who will listen to them, someone who will at least try to understand them — they need a friend.

In the two days I was at ASH, I made many friends. It was easy.

Some of them helped ease the isolation feeling I got from the whole ordeal. These patients know what's going on and they're doing what they can to get better. But for most of them, I'm afraid their sullen faces will haunt me for quite some time.

There's no reason it should be this way. Texas is a great state, and Texasians are proud of it. But the patients in our state mental hospitals are Texans too, and the way they're treated is nothing to be proud of. We pay taxes to put them in these hospitals, but the government isn't spending enough of this money to give them a good chance at getting better.

Texas needs to get its priorities straight. Traditionally, when the state hands out allowances, human services hasn't been a favorite child. We spend enough to build ourselves some beautiful highways, but with the amount we're spending on public mental care, the path to the hospital is a one-way street.

Pavement before people. I wonder that's in the Texas Constitution somewhere.

**Scott Redepening is a senior journalism major and make-up editor for The Battalion.**



## Be careful what you wish for — you might get it

When you want something for so long that it becomes almost dream-like to even think of it, its materialization can be most unnerving.

I wanted it. No, that's too modest. I prayed for it. And when I got it, I thought it would kill me. But somehow I managed to survive my first career-related job interview and actually come out of it unscathed.

All college students — at least the ones I know, which for all practical purposes in my world are the only ones that matter — look forward to their first real job interview with something like the emotion related to a long-awaited Christmas present.

The closer it gets, the more you anticipate it. Not to say, of course, that the various secretarial jobs I used to pay my way through this fine institution of higher learning weren't real — they just didn't fall on my list of REAL jobs.

A REAL job is something one spends four — or in the case of many of my journalist friends — six or more years planning, studying and almost starving for.

The big day came. I stood looking into my bathroom mirror — the picture of confidence was reflected back at me. I had my best suit on — it actually still fit — hair in place, make-up Vogue-perfect and briefcase tucked confidently under my arm. I was ready to take on the world. Or at least the managing editor of the Bryan-College Station Eagle.

Then a strange phenomenon took place somewhere between my house's doorknob and the steps of the newspaper building. All the confidence I had so carefully summoned had evaporated. What was left behind was not a pretty sight.

The newspaper is only 7.2 miles from my house — yet for some reason unknown to me, I left my house 30 minutes early.

I wanted to impress him by not being late — reporters are never supposed to be late. But 30 minutes early! No, that

would never do. That was much too early — too eager. I headed for a safe haven — somewhere I could calm my nerves and try to convince God to give me back the confidence I had so carelessly lost somewhere. I turned to Dairy Queen! It seemed to be the perfect place. And, most important, it sells Coke. I was starting to lose my grip on life.

I discovered that it's amazing how fast one can drink 83 cents worth of cold, fizzy brown liquid at that hour of the morning.

There I sat in my car — the radio playing much too loudly. Of course, the stupid radio was doing nothing for my nerves, but the song was something familiar — something I was sure of.

As I sat there I had the most bizarre thought. I have never hyperventilated in my life — in fact, I'm not even sure I would know that was what was happening to me if I ever actually did hyperventilate. However, I found myself thinking how comforting it would be to have a paper bag in my possession — just in case.

I now had 15 minutes. I figured that was adequate time to drive 2.5 miles, find the ladies' room (for what seemed the 100th time that morning), and present myself to the managing editor's secretary a cool eight minutes early.

Perfect. Now if I could just pull it off. I actually made it without having a major accident. That seemed to be the longest 2.5 miles I've ever had to drive.

I was sure I would be late. I missed my mark by one minute. I gave the secretary a fake calm smile at the seven-minute mark. Once the interview was underway, I was besieged by a whole new set of self-induced traumas. Was his joke that funny? Did I laugh too much? Am I sitting up straight? Was that answer good enough? My God, if I blow this he'll never interview me again. I should have waited three or four more months until I was really ready! Why did I let my professor talk me into this?

Looking back — as we all know everything looks more logical that way — the interview was actually a big success. This

editor and I even liked the same author — how lucky could I have been?

He told me to call him in a month to see if anything "developed." That's it. I knew I had blown it. But, hoping against hope, I penciled on my calendar to call him one month to the day. But every journalism student at A&M must beg him for a job, I thought. I don't have a chance.

He called me two-and-a-half weeks later to offer me a job.

**Carolyn Garcia is a senior journalism major and staff writer for The Battalion and the Bryan-College Station Eagle.**

## Once upon a time in Aggieland . . .

### About Aggie manners — Sept. 23, 1938

"The Aggies are positively uncouth." This was a remark overheard in a show at Bryan after a particularly repulsive exhibition had been made by students of A. & M. The statement, condemning as it was, is all too often true.

Social customs, usually, are dictated by the behavior of groups high in social standing by the actions of individuals in these groups, and by popular opinion. Even the groups in the lower social strata attempt to imitate the actions of their more highly educated and supposedly superior countrymen.

Popular opinion, then, is a powerful factor in determining social correctness and in forming judgments of groups. By this line of reasoning it is

logical to assume that college students enjoy a position not attained by the average citizen. That is, they have the privilege of helping to form social customs while conforming to the previously set accepted.

Aggies, because of their gregarious nature, sometimes do not conform to accepted standards and by failing to do so cannot measure as high on the social scale as university students should.

A notable example of nonconformity in Aggies is the rowdiness many of them display in neighboring theaters. Undoubtedly, most of this is caused by freshmen and some by well-meaning, but unthoughtful upperclassmen. But such behavior is inexcusable even in those groups. Level-

headed upperclassmen could put an end to rowdiness and unnecessary noise in theaters by a simple explanation of the importance of proper behavior. If such an explanation were not sufficient, then perhaps more forceful means could be employed.

Attitudes formed by visitors observing a few Aggie rowdies detracts from the glory of going to A. & M. and is highly detrimental to the school and its former students.

We do not advocate stilted mannerisms — they might tend to destroy self-expressiveness — but surely, no Aggie likes to be spoken of as being uncouth, ill-mannered.

The point, then, is: Behave as you have been taught and do as you know is right!

## Mail Call

### Lady wears a bow

EDITOR:

This letter is in response to Karl Pallmeyer's recent comments on bowheads. I am sending Pallmeyer a few ideas to ponder:

1. A correction should be made to your list of clubs at which to find bowheads. No self-respecting bowhead would be caught dead at the Rox-z. Everyone knows a bowhead's natural habitat is Rocco's.
2. Not all bowheads are greek.
3. Black-patent-leather shoes and training bras will come back in style before your haircut.
4. Your ideas about oral sex and bowheads should be changed to your dreams about oral sex and bowheads.

Amy Bening '89

### Those tell-tale tags

EDITOR:

Karl Pallmeyer, you were way off the mark in hoping that the fashion trend of wearing bows on the head comes to a quick end. There is one quite valid reason for fashion-conscious women to continue wearing them: they serve as a warning beacon to unwary guys like us. When we see some girl wearing her "bitch tag," we automatically know that we don't have the money, the expensive cars or the "yes dear" personalities to suit her — so we steer clear. Of course, this isn't true in all cases, but since we're traditional-minded Ags, we're quite willing to stereotype and avoid them all. After all, if they're wearing a label, why not give them one? Great column, Pallmeyer! We especially loved the part about Corona beer and greek-lettered sweatshirts!

Randall Carter '87, accompanied by two signatures

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(USPS 045 360)

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The Battalion also serves as a laboratory newspaper for students in reporting, editing and photography classes within the Department of Journalism.

The Battalion is published Monday through Friday during Texas A&M regular semesters, except for holiday and examination periods.

Mail subscriptions are \$17.44 per semester, \$34.62 per school year and \$36.44 per full year. Advertising rates furnished on request.

Our address: The Battalion, 216 Reed McDonald, Texas A&M University, College Station, TX 77843-4111.

Second class postage paid at College Station, TX 77843.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to The Battalion, 216 Reed McDonald, Texas A&M University, College Station TX 77843-4111.