

Raymond Lifchez

Audio transcript: On the impact of meeting people with disabilities while renovating a state hospital in New York City

Date: August 9, 2000

Interviewer: Susan O'Hara

Note: Transcripts have been lightly edited; therefore there may be slight discrepancies with audio clips.

Lifchez:

For about five or six years, through about 1965 to 1970, I worked for a firm in New York that did city planning, urban design and so on, and I ran a job for the New York State Office of Health and Mental Hygiene. It was to renovate a very large mental hospital in New York City called Ward's Island and on the island to also build some new facilities for difficult teenage boys. So in those five years I spent a lot of time going in and out of state hospitals, and I spent a lot of time at this particular hospital, Ward's Island. When I say "spent time" it wasn't walking the corridors with the chiefs, because our charge was to take this several acre tract in the middle of the East River, within walking distance of Manhattan, to make it into a public environment and one of the main concerns of the hospital was what would happen to the inmates of the hospital if confronted by the public across the river—there was a drawbridge.

So I would wander the grounds and also this extensive open space of maybe five or six acres, seven acres—maybe more, I don't remember—and I often encountered people who were in the hospital, inmates or patients, and so many of them had physical disabilities and so on. I was there very frequently over five years, so I kind of knew people. People would say "hello" and we would chat it up; you know, I'm a Southerner. So when I got to Berkeley, I suddenly saw all of these people on the streets—in their wheelchairs, especially—who looked no different than the people that I'd seen in that hospital and who struck me as being—the people in the hospital, I frequently couldn't understand why they were there. Often they would say that they were there because they had no money or the state had put them there or their families had put them there. Well, I never knew really what their stories meant. But in Berkeley I saw people who were just out like free birds, not incarcerated, and it got me really interested.

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