

NEWS RELEASE

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Contact: Bob Uhlar (You-ler) 913-758-6165

E-mail: Uhlar69@stmary.edu



Nursing Students Get the Strait Scoop On Treatment of the Mentally Ill

University of Saint Mary nursing students had a unique learning experience recently at the Glore Psychiatric Museum in Saint Joseph, Mo. Students began the tour with a demonstration of how patients were restrained with straitjackets. Nursing students Jenny Sparks and Tara Christy volunteered to be models.

Very close to the museum is the building that once inhabited a ward of St. Joseph State Hospital - called the State Lunatic Asylum #2 until 1899 -- a fortress-like mental health complex. Modern medication has returned nearly all the patients to society, making way for the state to turn the facility into a prison.

"Holy Cow!" exclaimed one student when the group arrived at one of the most popular exhibits in the Glore museum - "The Stomach Contents" display, a bizarre mosaic of 1,446 items removed from the stomach and intestines of a female patient in 1926. Items included 453 nails, 42 screws, safety pins, straight pins, the handles of spoons and forks, salt and pepper shaker tops, and more. The patient suffered from a disorder called pica, an appetite for non-nutritive substances. She died of stomach bleeding during surgery to remove the items.

Another display showed 525 secret notes a male patient jammed into the back of the TV hoping to communicate during Prime Time. Tour guide Teresa Burch explained, "He thought if messages came out of the television, messages could go in too. We're all amazed that the TV never caught fire."

The tour ended with a graphic video of the history of treatment of the mentally disturbed. Students winced and buried their heads in horror at a segment taped in the 1940s in which Dr. Walter Freeman performed transorbital frontal lobotomies on two patients, while they were awake, using a metal probe, much like an ice pick, and, using a rubber mallet, he hammered through the bony roofs of the orbits (eye-sockets) to access the brain's frontal lobes.

Students sighed with relief when the video moved ahead to 1952, when chlorpromazine (Thorazine) was discovered by Henri Laborit. Considered a wonder drug, Thorazine alleviated symptoms of hallucinations, delusions, agitation, and thought disorders. The success of Thorazine paved the way for increased research in the field of psychopharmacology. For many patients, Thorazine so lessened psychotic symptoms that many could lead relatively normal lives.