

# Advocacy Network News

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## Hey, You “Retard!”

*[Reprinted from Advocacy Network News  
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“You stupid retard!”

“Well, duh, he’s nothin’ but a retard!”

The accent is always on the first syllable.

“REE-tard.”

This is the put-down I so often hear in my classroom and in the hallways of the nearby school where I’ve been teaching high school English for three decades.

One student is insulted because another disagrees with his choice over which rock band is better. “What do you know, anyway, you retard!”

One kid bumps into another in the hallway, knocking his armload of books on the floor. “You retard!”

My wife teaches in an elementary school. Another teacher is assigned a new student, and remarks, “Hey, I got a new kid in my class today. I think he’s a retard.”

Same emphasis. REE-tard. But this time uttered by an adult — an educator.

For relatives and friends of those who were born mentally retarded, the word stings with the impact of the strongest racial slur or ethnic epithet. It seems that in the age of political correctness, “REE-tard” still hasn’t made the list of words now considered taboo.

If called to task, both the offending students and the teacher would readily say, “We’ll, gee, I didn’t really mean it *that* way. I wasn’t talking about your sister.”

Maybe not.

In one of my classes, I have my students read the novel *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden*. Set in the middle-America of 1948, this book addresses the issue of mental illness, as a 16-year-old girl struggles against the demons of an imaginary kingdom and the prejudices of the real world. After an attempted suicide, Deborah’s parents struggle with their decision to place her in a mental hospital. Her father sees it not as a place for getting better,

**Keeping the Faith ...** Ben Ricci’s *Crimes Against Humanity* is a must-read for all relatives and friends of those with mental retardation. In his usual no-holds-barred manner, Ben recounts the horrific, medieval conditions uncovered at Belchertown State School in the 1950s and ‘60s, the formation of Friends of Belchertown (now *Advocacy Network*), the battles with uncaring DMR bureaucrats, and our landmark class-action lawsuit in federal court to bring social justice and protection to the mentally retarded citizens of Massachusetts. This is a work of courage, persistence, and faith. Copies autographed by Dr. Ricci available at the Belchertown Fair.

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advocating for  
all retarded persons

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but a place “where they put people away.” Inside the institution, Deborah is abused by some of the attendants and patients on “D” Ward, so named because it houses the most disturbed. There are bars on the windows, and people scream.

My students tell me that societal attitudes toward mental illness and retardation have changed since the time of this novel. It is 1998, not 1948. “People are more accepting of mental problems today. It’s more openly discussed.”

Yes, there have been improvements. Back in the sixties, when my wife’s parents marriage could no longer endure the pressures of caring for her autistic sister, they placed her at Belchertown State School. The officials said it would be good for my wife’s sister, and it would be good for her mother, who was bearing a mother’s guilt for having a retarded daughter.

It was euphemistically referred to as a “school,” but what I noticed on my first visit there were the bars on the windows. The echoing hallways, featured dirty, chipped paint in institutional colors, and the pungent smell of urine. On a warm summer day, outside on a concrete terrace were dozens of residents milling around, some shouting, some staring, some less than half-dressed — a bedlam of human beings.

Today my sister-in-law lives in a state-run home in a residential neighborhood. Although the operation of the eight-person house is certainly not without problems, the building itself is much more inviting, a world away from the barred windows of BSS. So there *have* been some improvements.

But often when a home for the retarded has been proposed in a particular community, many neighbors still gather in opposition. They cite “traffic problems” and “property values.” But they really don’t want to have to look at “REE-tards.”

Last week my wife was attending a workshop for elementary teachers at an area college. They were studying science, and how to motivate young children to develop their interests in the world of nature around them. The conversation got around to schools and the issue of “inclusion,” mainstreaming special education students in the regular classroom. The workshop instructor ventured the opinion that “Some of these kids are uneducable. They don’t belong in a regular classroom because they can’t learn. Maybe we ought to just put them away.”

Another statement from an adult, this time a teacher of teachers. Could “REE-tard” have been far from his lips?

Back to the barred windows.

-- Edward Orzechowski  
Editor