

Behind closed doors: Controversy at Harbor Hills

Just another day at a psychiatric facility

EDITOR'S NOTE — Harbor Hills psychiatric nursing facility houses almost exclusively indigent patients. In articles in today's Sentinel and again Monday, Sentinel Staff Writer Don Miller takes a look at those patients, those who care for them, the administrators and the facility itself.

By **DON MILLER**
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SANTA CRUZ — They walk the haunted corridors, outwardly silent, inwardly hearing the din of hell, as the voices only they can hear move them about like dream ghosts.

It is another day at Harbor Hills, another day for the 99 lost souls stalking its sad corridors, putting in their time in the faint hope the voices will quiet, will return from whence they came. Another day of swallowing medicinal potions that bleed them of spirit while banishing their demons.

Another day for the staff at Santa Cruz's largest locked, skilled private psychiatric nursing facility. The patients, the schizophrenics with their mocking voices, the manic-depressives with their sun-and-moon mood swings, the severely depressed with their seeming incomprehension of life's minor triumphs, keep walk-

ing on their endless journey down the dark hallways. The psychiatric aides walk with them.

Some of the patients huddle in the recreation room, silently watching a golf match on a large color television set. Others puff nervously on cigarettes in the designated smoking room, their faces obscured in clouds of blue smoke.

Outside, in the concrete surfaced "yard," a man lies face down in the noonday sun. His legs are splayed outward; one foot is bare, the other has a ragged sock on it.

Another man walks up and says in a dull voice, "Do you know where I can get some shoes?" Nobody does.

Inside, a man with long brown hair walks the hallway. His arms are held out in front of his body, as if he were sleepwalking. The man stops and gives a shy smile. "The drugs help me get through the day," he says.

A nervous aide opens the door into Ruth Saffin's room. She sits on her bed, a thin, dark-haired woman in a flowery print dress. She's been a patient at Harbor Hills for 7½ months.

She says she was arrested for the "wild dances" she performed to uphold the cause of peace and freedom in this tired world. She was taken to the Acute Care ward

at Dominican Hospital where, she says, she went into an "art trance." She danced and danced and danced and nobody could make her stop.

She's given lithium to hold back her urge to dance. Her room is clean and sparse; there are two beds, tables, books ... "Everything is fine here," Ruth says. She only regrets "the friends I've lost."

Now, her friends, she says, are the staff, the psychiatric aides who have the ultimate responsibility at Harbor Hills for people like Ruth, for their treatment and welfare.

Ruth says she loves the aides. "I love people. I just love people," she repeats over and over again.

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In the past five years, Harbor Hills has struggled to prove it truly does love the mentally ill patients who call it home. The patients, with one exception, are all Medi-Cal recipients. They are the poor, the indigent, the people who were turned out of the state hospitals in the great California budget cuts of the 1970s. They are the unwanted, the unloved, the sickest of the sick. The issue of how they are to be cared for, and at what cost, is one that society traditionally has kept out of sight and out of mind.