

The Body Shop | Unsinkable spirit of a woman with a disability provides a Thanksgiving lesson

*Written by Bryant Stamford, Special to The Courier-Journal
Nov. 21*

courier-
journal.com

When I met Dorothy in 1976, she was approaching middle age. Cute as a button with salt and pepper hair, she was short, a shade less than 5 feet, and nearly as round as she was tall. When we were introduced, she said, “Howdy, glad to meetcha,” then she gave me a big hug and hung on tight. I came to know Dorothy, and saw in her a deep love, innate goodness and kindness we all aspire to. Here’s her story.

Locked up

Many decades ago, mental hospitals were huge complexes that warehoused people, all kinds of people, and Dorothy was one of them. Her mother dropped her off when she was a toddler because she wasn’t right. She was mildly mentally challenged (a re-tard in those days). Dorothy was “taken in,” and from that day forward, she lived her entire life behind locked doors.

What kind of life was it? You can imagine, but Dorothy tells it best. In a court case pressed on Dorothy’s behalf by Louisville’s Council on Developmental Disabilities to free her and others like her from the tyranny of incarceration, Dorothy gave riveting testimony in which she described in her own words a long series of horrific transgressions. But when she gave her account, there was never a trace of anger or resentment toward the perpetrators. Amazing, when considering what they did to her.

For example, as Dorothy was led through her testimony on the witness stand, she was asked if she had ever had a toothache. She replied, “Yes, sir, but you don’t never wanna tell nobody.” When asked why, she explained, “ ’Cause if they’d knowed, they come getcha.” She was asked to go on. “Somebody tole on me one time, about my tooth hurtin’, so they come got me.” Dorothy stopped, and it was clear from the expression on her face the memory was terrifying. When she was encouraged to continue, she looked around, as if someone might be there who would tell on her and she’d get in trouble. With more encouragement, and the assurance she was safe, she said, “Two of ’em set me down and ...” She made a gesture with her hand. The attorney said, “You mean the attendants took your tooth out?” Dorothy nodded. The attorney then removed pliers from his pocket and held them up for all to see. “With this?” Dorothy recoiled in fear, then nodded again and said, “Uh-huh, and it hurt real bad.” Everyone in the courtroom was stunned.

Liberation

Thankfully, the case was won and Dorothy was set free. But now what? How could an adult woman who had been institutionalized her entire life, a woman with no education, no life-skills, make it on the outside? The answer was Community Living, a Louisville nonprofit agency created to help folks like Dorothy live successfully out in the world. Community Living

purchased a house in a beautiful neighborhood, and two other ladies moved in with Dorothy and a full-time staff. Ironically, it cost more to keep Dorothy confined in that snake pit of an institution than it did to allow her to live in comfort and with dignity in her own home.

The bottom line

On this Thanksgiving



Day, I'm thankful for Dorothy, an inspiration who showed me the immense power of forgiveness, and what turning the other cheek really means. And I'm thankful for the tireless efforts from those, like Community Living, who champion the cause of the helpless and vulnerable among us.

A final thought. Dorothy, and others like her, unfortunately, often are viewed as inferior, non-productive members of our society who should be shut away and kept out of sight. But the truth is, I believe they were put here on this Earth as examples of what we all can be if we set our goals high enough and work hard enough.

Have a happy and blessed Thanksgiving.

Bryant Stamford is professor and chairman of the department of kinesiology and integrative physiology at Hanover College. To contact him, email stamford@hanover.edu.