

SUNLAND: SHINING LIGHT ON A DARK HISTORY

An eerie rite of passage for teens



Brian Miller
DEMOCRAT STAFF WRITER

I never saw a young boy with dead eyes staring out a blackened window as a full moon's light glistened off panes of fragmented glass.

But I've been assured by others he was surely there with me the first night I visited "Sunnyland."

For the longest part of my youth, growing up in Tallahassee meant you heard tall tales about our very own abandoned and haunted children's mental hospital.

And it was a rite of passage to go check the urban legends out on your own. Well, not *alone* alone.

I went only twice, once somewhere around 18 years old and another time post college, just a few years before it would be torn down permanently in 2006.

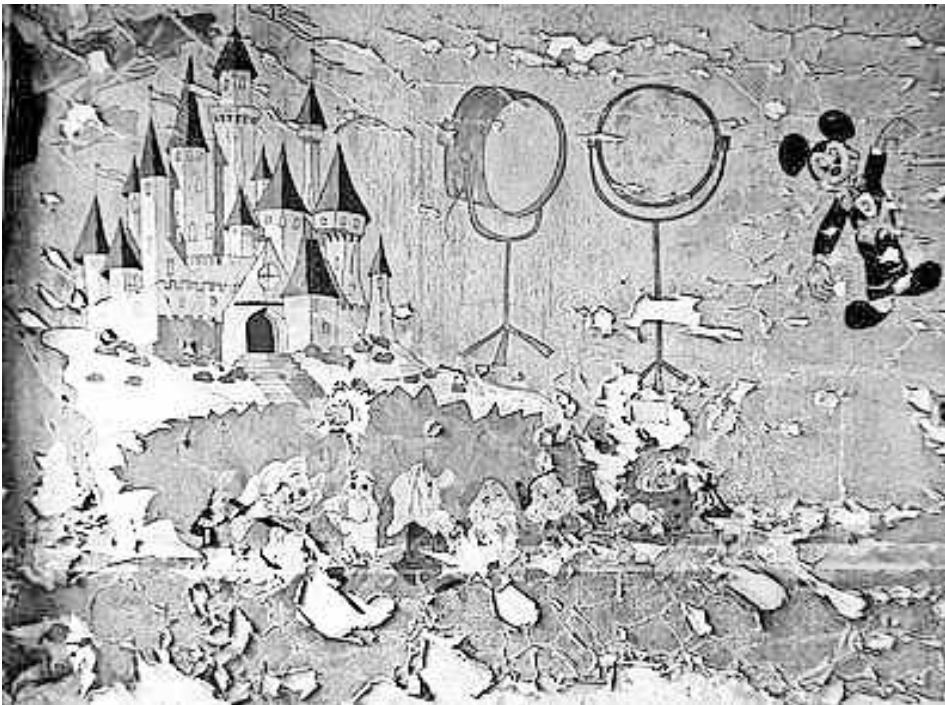
I'll never forget that first time.

Sunland Hospital, which we knew as Sunnyland, was on Phillips Road, site of where Victoria Grand Apartments now stand.

At that time, Blair Stone Road did not exist as the four-lane cut-through it is now, so Sunnyland sat firmly off the beaten trail, nestled with oaks, just a stone's throw from the Florida Department of Law Enforcement's building.

That last detail meant you couldn't just run out and go haunted house hunting on a moment's notice. You had to do it in the middle of the night — which was really the ghostly appeal anyway — and you had to coordinate with a few others.

We had lookouts with walkie-talkies who hid under cover of darkness, dressed in dark clothes and hiding in bushes, watching for police patrols



A photo was taken inside Sunland Hospital before it was demolished.

DEMOCRAT FILES

when they might come by so that those inside could turn off their flashlights.

Those moments of pure quiet, sitting in blackness waiting for a police car to pass, were a nice side thrill to the experience.

We parked a good distance away and trekked through tall grasses to the back side of the hospital. There was a tall barbed wire fence poorly doing its job, and we found the commonly used bent area and ducked under it, entering the hospital around the back left corner.

I want to say there were four floors to Sunnyland, so it's a rather expansive building to navigate in the middle of the night with just flashlights guiding you. And, yes, you wanted to have extra batteries on hand.

As you walked, you tried to stay close to the person around you. There always seemed to be at least one person in your group who was overly familiar with the layout, and totally at ease with turning off a light and trying to scare you at every opportunity.

As my group progressed toward the central entrance on the ground floor, I remember coming across an ominous elevator shaft, doors wide open and elevator long removed.

The space below floor level, approximately 5 feet deep, was filled with water, the surface as unbroken and shiny as black obsidian. If any of my friends had dared submerge themselves in water and burst out with a machete, my heart would surely have exploded.



CRAIG LITTEN/DEMOCRAT FILES

A view down a stairwell inside Sunland Hospital reveals its run-down condition in 2001.

In Sunnyland, too, there was always the threat of turning a corner and being genuinely surprised by a passed-out homeless person, slumped along a hallway.

We made our way up a stairwell and to a higher floor, which one I can't remember.

What I do recall, a sight that has never left my gray matter, is that of a children's hospital room, painted in shades of light blue with balloons and rainbows decorating the interior but well-worn, faded and peeling from time.

Creeeeeeeeeee.

Especially under the broken light filtering through windows as tree branches' shadows danced murderously on the wall.

I later looked out a fourth-story window. It seemed as if I could see for miles, and in the middle of the night the outside is eerily calm.

No, I never saw that boy hauntingly staring out a window, but perhaps *I was him* to an unsuspecting passer-by.

That's how legends are created, and Sunnyland had some of the best.

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COURTESY MIKE KOZLENKO

Rona Akbari sits for a microphone check before filming the "Welcome to Sunland" documentary.

Documentary explores haunting history

MIKE KOZLENKO
SPECIAL TO THE DEMOCRAT

If you had complete creative freedom to tell any story you wanted, no holds barred, which kind would you gravitate toward?

As four Florida State University Digital Media Production students, we knew we wanted to tell the story of something spooky and bizarre — a tale in the realm of urban legends and folklore. At our first meeting, I mentioned an old abandoned hospital in Tallahassee, which was known to treat people with mental and physical disabilities in the late '60s to early '70s. After a few Google searches, we found out that this place was called Sunland Hospital. When we saw what Sunland looked like in its final days, we knew immediately that we had our topic for the project.

Our next breakthrough came from our online research when we discovered Terror of Tallahassee. Terror of Tallahassee is a local haunted house, which coincidentally features an exhibit about Sunland. We contacted the owner, Kurt Kuersteiner, and asked if he would offer a more detailed description of the hospital's past. He was more than willing to be interviewed and ended up being a reservoir of knowledge for our documentary.

We researched more about the hospital through FSU's Special Collections Library and the State Archives of Florida. The more material we gathered, the more we were pulled into its story. We would never have expected a place with such a complex and distressing history, one that existed just miles away from our own campus. We took several trips to the State Archives, continued with even more online research, read dozens of articles and viewed hundreds of photos on the patients of Sunland. We started narrowing down our story quickly.

We had some great material from Kurt but needed another source to give life to Sunland from another angle. Luckily, one of my friends knew a young woman, Tori Case, who actually visited Sunland before its demolition in 2006. We knew that her experiences visiting Sunland in its abandoned state would be



CARRIE NILAND/DEMOCRAT FILES

Sunland Hospital, seen here from Blair Stone Road near Phillips Road, was built in the 1950s and abandoned in 1983.

pivotal to our narrative — especially in exploring its unique folklore that has endured over multiple generations.

Since the hospital no longer exists, we wanted our documentary to serve as a visual experience for those who cannot walk through the building now. We explored abandoned locations in Tallahassee and Jacksonville to emulate the decrepit and deteriorated look Sunland once had.

As we neared the end of our filming process, we began sorting through the various interviews and footage we had already gathered. As we relistened to Kurt and Tori's accounts of Sunland, we found that the use of archival footage

would complement the storyline well. As we researched further, we found several people had posted videos of them exploring the abandoned building. With these, as well as the inclusion of the news articles we had recently collected at the State Archives of Florida, we had a clear vision for the narrative structure.

Once the final product was fully developed and all of the last-minute touches were completed, Sunland had successfully come back to life on screen.

Mike Kozlenko, Rona Akbari, Evan Garcia and Christopher Sintic are juniors at Florida State University studying digital media production.

Sunland

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people), which had opened three years before in 1949.

» W.T. Edwards Hospital cost \$4 million to build (compared with TMH's \$2 million) and was a self-contained "virtual city," the newspapers reported. In addition to its own laundry, heating plant and landscaped 160 acres, the compound had six individual homes for physicians and their families, plus an apartment complex for 72 nurses. Located a mile east of the city limits, on what is today Phillips Road and Blair Stone Road, it was considered well out in the country, where the pure air could help tuberculosis patients.

» W.T. Edwards Hospital was named for the chairman of the state tuberculosis board. Edwards was a native of Virginia and an industrialist who came to Florida in 1925 with Edward Ball to manage the DuPont company interests. He served as president of the tuberculosis board from its inception in 1934 to 1958. He spearheaded construction of numerous state tuberculosis hospitals, beginning with Orlando in 1937-38.

» Tuberculosis, an infectious disease of the lungs, was the nation's second-most-deadly disease (behind influenza/pneumonia) at the turn of the 20th century. Its chief treatment was sanatoriums dedicated to giving patients fresh air to heal the lesions on their lungs. By 1959, vaccines were so successful in preventing tuberculosis that the number of cases nationwide plummeted from nearly 30 people per 100,000 to fewer than 7 per 100,000. In 1969, the state tuberculosis board was dissolved into the Florida Department of Health.

» W.T. Edwards Hospital closed in 1966. In 1967, after a remodeling, the facility was opened as one of six statewide Sunland facilities for the mentally and physically disabled. The other facilities were called "centers" and handled only those with mental disabilities; Tallahassee's facility was called a hospital because it handled those with mental and physical disabilities.

» Tallahassee's Sunland Hospital was ordered closed in 1979 by the Florida Legislature, amid charges of overcrowding, poor sanitation, lack of employee training and patient abuse at all Sunlands. Tallahassee's Sunland was charged with mismanaging \$13,000 in patient accounts (of money provided by families for spending at the facility); a Tallahassee employee was convicted of stealing \$3,000. A class-action lawsuit by the families of Sunland patients led to the creation of smaller, group homes for the mentally and physically disabled. It took until December 1983 before Tallahassee's Sunland Hospital closed with the transfer of its last patients.

» The state began efforts in 2003 to sell the Tallahassee Sunland building and property, an effort stymied by the presence of lead paint and asbestos in the building. By that time, the building had become a haven for the homeless, partying teenagers and vandals, who spray-painted its walls, started fires and fostered the building's reputation as "haunted." Nearly residents reported hearing ghostly screams at night.

» In January 2006, Gov. Jeb Bush and the Florida Cabinet signed an agreement to sell the building to a developer for \$5.3 million. Demolition efforts began in September 2006. In 2008, the Victoria Grand Apartments complex opened on the site of the former hospital.

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