How the Former Brandon Training School Became a Thriving Village

BY **KATHRYN FLAGG** [06.19.13]

This place is haunted. That's the word from a handful of ghost hunters and at least one plumber, who refuses to work alone in a few of the buildings at Park Village.

These days, the mixed-use commercial and residential park a mile north of Brandon is dotted with daycares and doctors' offices, subsidized housing and small businesses — not exactly the stuff of ghost stories. But it's Park Village's history that spooks the occasional visitor. The campus is still better known to longtime locals as the Brandon Training School — the last in a series of names borne over the years by what was originally called the Vermont State School for Feebleminded Children.

The charitable interpretation is that this sprawling campus — all brick buildings, winding lanes and mature, leafy trees — was founded at a time when the care of children and adults with developmental disabilities seemed best executed within the walls of an institution. But by the 1980s, Vermont advocates for disabled individuals had soured on the idea of warehousing people in a facility cut off from the rest of the community.

"It went from having some fairly good intentions originally ... to being a custodial and segregating place," recalls Gail Falk, who worked on the team that orchestrated the Training School's closing in 1993. "It wasn't a place that people could feel, *I belong here. This is my home*."

And so, 20 years ago, the Training School bade farewell to its final denizen. While the path forward seemed clear for its former residents — who were moved out of the institution and into individualized, community-based living arrangements — the fate of the buildings they left behind was less certain.

There was talk of a college campus. A few officials floated the idea of a correctional facility — a proposal that bombed among locals. The state even approached real estate developer Peter Holmberg, who had worked on the Wake Robin senior-living facility in Shelburne, and suggested creating a retirement community.

The state tried for years to sell off BTS in one big chunk. At one point, it brought in a Boston real estate firm to market the property, but the effort failed.

“Nobody wanted it,” Holmberg says. “It was built for a statewide program for housing people. It wasn’t built for a local, regional market, so it took decades to tabsorb it all.”

What happened instead was a piecemeal reinvention. In 1996, Holmberg purchased six buildings; he spent $7 million over the next four years converting them into affordable housing units for families and seniors. (“There’s always demand for that,” he says.)

A local construction company, the McKernon Group, bought several other properties the following year. Building by building, the former training school shed its institutional image in favor of a hodgepodge of uses.

“There wasn’t a soul in here,” says Kevin Birchmore, owner of the McKernon Group. Birchmore, who grew up in Brandon, remembers the haze of light pollution the old BTS cast in the distance. “The whole place would be aglow at night,” he says.

But the campus he encountered in the 1990s was a very different place: desolate and overgrown with weeds. After a few short years of standing dormant, the buildings were falling into disrepair. There were deals to be had, especially as the state dropped its asking prices for various buildings. And so, through the ’90s and much of the early 2000s, the construction group’s philosophy was to pour money into the campus bit by bit, fixing up structures with a faith in “build it and they will come.”

“We used to do it backwards,” Birchmore says. “Spend all the money, get it ready and hope that somebody would come.”

Above: Justin Charron, Rob Leno and Kevin Birchmore of the McKernon Group at work. Photo by Caleb Kenna.

Come they finally did. After 20 years, Park Village is almost entirely occupied. The owners of one of the most recent projects, a new music and arts center are taking on the ambitious renovation of a 52,000-square-foot former infirmary. Today, all the buildings on the former BTS campus but one — Building J — have been overhauled and put to new use.

Now Brandon’s economic development bigwigs are dreaming of a business incubator or food hub in Building J. It will take deep pockets and some imagination. The one-time dormitory, which housed some of BTS’ most severely disabled individuals, fell into neglect after the state moved out. Vandals stripped the building of its copper pipes and plumbing.

Some of the old Plexiglas windows are cracked or broken, and those that remain intact scarcely keep out the elements.

“A year ago, this was a hockey rink. The roof leaked so bad ... you could *literally* skate in here,” Birchmore says, standing in the one roughly renovated wing of the old dorm. Today it houses a washing factory for the Vermont Fiber Mill, which turns fiber into batts, roving, yarn and felt.

The fiber-washing station, overseen by McKernon employee and Maple View Farm Alpacas owner Ed Bratton, hints at the building’s possible transformation. Outfitted with fresh drywall and new plumbing, the place feels clean and industrial.

But wander a bit farther into the building, and the landscape changes. Bratton peeks into one of the bathrooms, where handicap-accessible bars still line toilet stalls without doors. “The first time I saw this, they had big stainless-steel tables with straps,” he says. “They would strap people down to bathe them.”

In one of the building’s main rooms, there’s an old IBM clock on the wall, its hands paused permanently at 2:15. Old water fountains are still mounted in nooks along the hallways. Around a corner, Birchmore points out the nurses’ stations, now empty, where aides watched over their charges. The ceiling tiles had turned to “mush” in parts of the building by the time McKernon started its cleanup efforts, he says. Wallpaper sagged in the hallway corridors.

McKernon’s carpenters have ripped out interior walls in some parts of the building, leaving behind a gutted, brightly lit expanse. Other sections are still a rabbit’s warren of little rooms, to which BTS residents were assigned in ones or twos. Name tags on a few of the doors identify inhabitants long gone: C. Blake. A. Lussien.

“You have to have some vision,” Bratton admits, picking his way through the dusty, dim halls.

It’s an understatement.

It’s a year of anniversaries for the former training school. In addition to marking two decades since the institution’s closing, this year is the 100th since Vermont legislators authorized the formation of a state-run school for the developmentally disabled.

Before that, Vermont sent some of its disabled children to out-of-state facilities. But families wanted their kids closer to home, and the cost of outsourcing care was mounting. In 1915, the state acquired a nearly 300-acre farm just north of Brandon, a former horse-breeding and racing operation. The new school initially took in 45 children, many of whom were previously living at institutions in Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Massachusetts.

On the positive side, the institution provided a much-needed alternative to local poor houses and poor farms. With many families ill equipped to handle children with special needs, and public schools closed to individuals with disabilities, BTS offered the rare chance for specialized training and care. But Vermont in the early 20th century was also home to a strong eugenics movement and a pervasive belief that the developmentally disabled should be segregated, sterilized or both.

The former farm kept some of its agricultural roots; children at the school helped milk cows, tend pigs and chickens, and produce maple syrup. By the early ’40s the school was tending some 370 residents and began admitting its first kids under the age of 5. For the rest of the school’s tenure, BTS housed individuals of all ages — from small children up through the elderly. The population peaked in the 1960s with more than 600 residents; over BTS’ 78-year span of operation, more than 2300 individuals called it home at one point or another. Individual residents’ needs ran the gamut: Some suffered from severe Down syndrome, cerebral palsy or autism. Others had what experts now recognize as post-traumatic stress syndrome.

Admissions slowed in the school’s final decades. Many of the institution’s more independent patients moved to local farms, where they worked as farmhands, or to community-care homes. Local public schools began catering to the needs of disabled children, and volunteer programs evolved into publicly funded day programs for disabled adults. BTS itself wasn’t a “scary, horrible place” anymore, recalls Falk — but experts increasingly realized that it might not offer its residents the best option for care.

Above: Early image of a dormitory. Courtesy of the Vermont Department of Disabilities, Aging and Independent Living.

The facility was crowded, recalls Jackie Rogers, who worked at BTS in the late ’70s and early ’80s as an aide and now is interim director of Vermont’s Division of Developmental Disabilities Services. Two or three staff members would tend as many as 25 residents at a

time, she remembers. “The staff were pretty much in control of people’s lives,” Rogers says. “It didn’t take me too long to realize that this wasn’t the way to do it, that there had to be a better way.”

Paul Nichols, now 52, lived at the school from 1963 to 1979; he suffers from cerebral palsy. “To me it was like a dump,” Nichols says. A few pleasant memories — of dances, a teenage romance and parades and wagon rides — are today outweighed by his complaints about the food and the restrictions on his day-to-day life. “I was happy to get out of there,” he says. “I got out of there as fast as I could.”

Nichols wasn’t alone in that objective. The school’s closing was hastened by one BTS resident, Robert Brace, who turned to Vermont Legal Aid for assistance in a class-action lawsuit. Brace wanted to move out of BTS, and the so-called Brace Decree set in motion a 10-year timeline for developing better housing alternatives for its residents.

Becky Guyett, now interim director of the Office of Public Guardian in the Division of Disability and Aging Services, says that the atmosphere improved through the 1980s, when she worked at the school: Residents had more privacy and could help make their own meals. “It still was not a place that I would want to live,” she says.

Services at BTS increased as medical and mental health professionals learned more about treating individuals with developmental disabilities — but so did costs. Better care meant additional facilities, educational programs and staff. In its last decades, BTS became enormously expensive to run.

“Group living is much more expensive than individualized support,” says June Bascom of the Division of Disability and Aging Services. “That’s what caught the legislature’s ear.” Not only would people’s lives be “tenfold better” if the school closed, advocates argued, but the costs would come down — significantly.

So the legislature signed off on several years of “bridge” funding, in which the state essentially propped up two concurrent systems: the institution and the emerging community-based model.

State employees, including Falk and former deputy commissioner of the Department of Disabilities, Aging and Independent Living Theresa Wood, spent years helping residents make the transition from the institution to other living arrangements. Some went to small group homes, which housed four to six residents. Most went into “shared living”

arrangements, in which a caretaker is paid a tax-free wage to house and care for a developmentally disabled individual; think foster care for adults.

Some found jobs — though not as many, Falk says, as state employees had originally hoped. But ultimately, she believes residents were better off in their new homes. “A lot of people became a lot calmer, because they could live in smaller places that respected their own rhythms and needs,” she says.

Brandon residents responded to the school’s closing, predictably, with trepidation: BTS employed hundreds of state employees in the region, and Wood says townspeople were frightened at the prospect of losing those jobs. Surprisingly, though, there were remarkably few RIFs, or reductions in force, when the school closed. That’s in part because several former aides and caretakers opened their homes to former residents.

Still, the town took a hit. No longer was there an influx of hundreds of state workers into the downtown at midday, where they could squeeze in a lunch break at a local diner.

Wood is convinced that Brandon is better off in the long run without BTS. “It’s definitely a better use of the buildings than warehousing people with disabilities,” she says.

But she never lingered for long on what would become of the school itself after the institution closed. “We just wanted to get rid of it as soon as possible,” she says.

“I was sitting here crying, remembering when I was a little teeny baby here in Dorm K,” Valerie Cameron told the *Rutland Herald* on the occasion of the school’s closing. “Now I’m happy Brandon Training School is closing for good. I miss some of the people from here, and I’m happy to see them. But I don’t want to be back here. I don’t want anyone to live here again — not even prisoners.”

Above: Early image of a building interior. Courtesy of the Vermont Department of Disabilities, Aging and Independent Living.

Of course, there *are* plenty of people living at the former BTS today. The Housing Trust of Rutland County is putting the finishing touches on a new housing development in the former administration building, outfitting the apartment complex with solar panels and a biomass boiler. And Holmberg’s 74 rental units — with rents between $700 and $1000 per month — are all full.

Bascom recalls how desolate the campus was when she wandered around it after the closing ceremonies, 20 years ago. “It felt hollow,” she says. “A good hollow. But there was something really disturbing about it.”

That’s mostly changed — though Bratton, who runs both the alpaca farm and the fiber mill with his wife, Debbie, admits she needed some convincing to move into the former BTS dorm.

“When I first started talking about this with my wife, she said, ‘You know, that building just scares me,’” Bratton says. His response? “Trust me.”

Now Brandon’s economic development director, Steve Beck, is hoping a few more trusting souls will look beyond Building J’s ramshackle appearance and trust that the rest of this complex could become something innovative. He and Birchmore have pitched several businesses on the space, but Birchmore admits there have been a few “I’m out of here” responses after a tour of the building.

Earlier this month, a group of small-scale entrepreneurs gathered in the one-time dining hall at Building J to discuss ideas for a business incubator or food hub. What if one of the old dormitory wings could be a cheese-making factory, and another outfitted with a commercial kitchen?

“It’s not going to happen overnight,” Beck cautions. “I think a lot of people think that economic development is just flicking a switch. It doesn’t work that way.”

A stone’s throw from Building J, the new owners of Building K — Stephen and Edna Sutton — are learning that firsthand. When the couple took possession of the building in January 2012, its basement was underwater. The Suttons weren’t dissuaded. They’ve set up shop as the Compass Music and Arts Foundation and are dreaming big.

“We could just see that the building was ready for another life,” Edna Sutton says.

It took 20 years, but today that description applies to the Brandon Training School as a whole.

“It’s gone from an abandoned bunch of buildings to a thriving little village,” says Holmberg. Ghosts and all.