



North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services
Division of Mental Health, Developmental Disabilities and Substance Abuse Services

Caswell Center

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QUALITY OF LIFE IS KEY AT CASWELL CENTER

For most of us, it would be hard to imagine ourselves living with mental retardation, a developmental disability, and/or a mental illness. It's a 24 hour a day/7 days a week reality for the staff and residents at Caswell Center, the state's oldest residential facility serving this special population in 38 counties of eastern North Carolina.

The American Association on Mental Retardation defines mental retardation as "a particular state of functioning that begins in childhood and is characterized by limitation in both intelligence and adaptive skills." Developmental disabilities also begin in childhood and include disorders such as: cerebral palsy, autism, fetal alcohol syndrome, Down syndrome, and Fragile X syndrome. Not everyone who lives with mental retardation is also living with a developmental disability, although it is often the case at Caswell Center. People living with mental retardation and/or developmental disabilities are also more likely to be diagnosed with psychiatric illness such as depression or anxiety disorders.

A Day in the Life

The average Caswell Center resident is a white male who is 57 years old and functioning in the profound range of mental retardation (IQ below 20). Since as much as 40% of Caswell's residents have psychiatric diagnoses, he may be taking psychoactive medication. He finds it extremely difficult to process basic sensory information. For this reason, he may be unable to verbally communicate his needs. He frequently perceives the world as confusing and even threatening, making it very uncomfortable for him to engage in or tolerate simple self-care tasks. When feeling overwhelmed or threatened, he often displays aggressive outbursts or other negative behaviors.

He will have plans for habilitation, treatment, and training that are coordinated by his occupational therapist, physical therapist, speech/language therapist, education specialist, medical doctor and psychologist. His team of Caswell specialists will work together, engineering his environment to ensure that he has the necessary supports to develop his adaptive skills. Adaptive skills generally fall into three important categories: *daily living* (getting dressed, using the bathroom, feeding oneself); *communication* (understanding speech and being able to respond); and *social* (interacting with peers, family and others). With the daily support provided by his dedicated professional team he will, over time, learn interdependence as he finds his place in the community. Along the way, they will celebrate little victories together, as a family celebrates its milestones.

Life Lessons, Life Values

It is during the journey toward self-determination that Caswell residents experience an enhanced quality of life. Quality of life is the foundation on which Caswell Center is built. Caswell values include: giving first priority to the individuals living at Caswell by treating them with respect, honesty and dignity; by recognizing their uniqueness; and by remembering that they have a right to make choices and decisions about their lives. It is in this spirit that the professionals serve the individuals who call Caswell Center home.

A customized life plan is created for each individual based on his or her functioning level and adaptive behavior. For those who function in the mild to moderate level (roughly 12% of Caswell's population), this plan includes opportunities to participate in art and music therapy. In the weekly Creative Expressions workshop, participants are told "you can't do anything wrong in here." Minimal instruction and assistance is given, as individuals are encouraged to discover the budding artists within themselves by exploring different media and techniques. Studies utilizing specific populations have shown that art therapy enhances self-sufficiency and self-esteem by giving participants choices that allow them control over the outcome. Group art sessions also provide a vehicle for communication – especially important for Caswell individuals striving to improve they way they interact with others. Caswell's "wall of fame" proudly displays the best of its residents' artwork in the administration building.

March is National Mental Retardation Month



Pencil portrait created by internationally known artist, Martha Perske.



"Fruit Bowl" a wax-resist portrait created by Caswell resident Craig S. using paint and crayon.

During March, the Lenoir County Arts Center will display Caswell residents' artwork along with the award-winning Perske Collection, pencil portraits depicting adults and children with mental retardation. This artwork shows remarkable sensitivity that emphasizes deep human beauty without denying the reality of disabilities. The first Perske Collection was purchased for Caswell Center through the joint efforts of the Community Council for the Arts, the Mental Health Association in Lenoir County, and the North Carolina Civitans in the East. Caswell residents' artwork will be on sale; 60% of the proceeds will directly benefit the individual artists while the remaining proceeds will be reinvested to maintain Caswell's art program.

The Lenoir County Art Center is located at 400 N. Queen Street in Kinston. Hours are Tuesday through Friday from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. and Saturday from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. For more information, call (252) 527-2517.