

An Account of Dr. Jean Valiquette and Huguette Valiquette and Their Experience Living and Working at the Kings Park Psychiatric Hospital

1966-1972

By Kristen Matejka

On June 30, 1966 Dr. Jean Valliquette and his wife Huguette, packed up their two children (Jean-Luc, 17 months and Diane, two) and all of their belongings into their old car and left Montreal, Canada for Dr. Valiquette's new job at the Kings Park Psychiatric Center in Kings Park, NY.

With a population of 10,000 patients, and with Charlie Buckman (also a Canadian) serving as superintendent, they arrived after a very long drive on a stifling summer day. Dr. Valiquette was fascinated with mental illness treatment and looked forward to working with the patients. He was completing his residency with the NY School of Psychiatry, located on Randall's Island. The well-established college was affiliated with the Kings Park State Hospital.

Dr. Valiquette studied under Sandor Rado, dean of the school. It was an interesting time, as new theories for treatment of the mentally ill were evolving and new medications, as well as psychotherapy, were emerging.

"I liked how Professor Rado thought," Dr. Valiquette said. "He looked at mental illness as being organo-dynamic. He was interested in the chemistry of the brain and how the nerves make connections. He was a believer in the use of medication."



Dr. Valiquette, left.

Other treatments up until that time at psychiatric centers included insulin-induced coma therapy and electroshock. While some people have a negative perception of electroshock therapy, (likely due to the popularity of the movie *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, Dr. Valiquette assumed), it actually was effective for certain disorders. But Dr. Valiquette subscribed to the theories of his professor that emerging medications, along with therapy, training and reintegration could be used to treat the chemical imbalances of the brain.

As his professor said, "A smile doesn't walk in thin air. There is something behind it." Figuring out what was behind it was the challenge."

When he first arrived he worked in the Admissions Building then he was transferred to the children's unit. Then he worked on a National Institute of Mental Health program under Dr. Olga von Tauber to create a separate unit for 25 males and 25 females ages 14-18. There they were looking to offer them a sense of hope, not despair and to teach them responsibility for their own actions. They were schooled in math, science, English and social studies, and given vocational training. Girls were taught the social graces and learned how to keep house, make clothes and cook. Boys were given manual skills training in ceramics, woodwork and weaving. They were taken on field trips and every effort was made to find them jobs and homes.

After working with juveniles, Dr. Valiquette went on to work in Group Five, which was a "chronic" section of about 300 patients in three wards.

"We worked to try to get them ready to go back into society," Dr. Valiquette said.

This involved creating social activities for them. They organized dances, played games, celebrated birthdays and holidays, worked with them on everyday skills and hygiene and took them on walks and to the supermarket. As the new medications were being used more and more, there was a push to move patients out into the community.

But it was more of a challenge in Group Two. There, before the use of medications, the patients were often "chronically institutionalized." They were, in every sense of the word, "institutionalized," having been admitted 30-40-50 years ago. They were largely inactive, mostly just eating and sleeping.

Many had no concept of time.

"I would ask someone, an elderly lady, how old she was and she would say '21.'" Dr. Valiquette said. "I would ask another and she would say, '18.' I realized that there were no clocks or calendars. So they were telling me how old they were when they were committed."

The doctors and aides worked to get them up, if capable, and moving. They were given therapy. Some were even able to start working.



Dr. Valiquette, right.

"I really feel that medication and therapy go together," he said. "The medicine removes 'the fire,' and the therapy tries to figure out what caused the fire."

At that time medications like Thorazine, Stelazine, Mellaril, Haldol, and Elavil were used to treat schizophrenia and depression and were "powerful tools," he said." It was like an all-new field. We had to work to get the medication levels right, but it was working and de-institutionalization had started."

Dr. Valiquette had some fond memories of patients. He remembered one patient who would hear his car when he drove up in the morning. And every morning, as the doctor got out of his car, the patient would peer out the window and would sing "On a clear day I can see forever!"

Another time, he was in a ward and everyone warned him about one patient who could be especially dangerous. So he decided to befriend the man, and ask him to be his assistant. Personal responsibility was an effective part of treatment, and Dr. Valiquette said the man served just as good as any attendant.

Daily Life

Huguette, Dr. Valiquette's young wife, recalls how unbelievably hot it was the day they arrived. And getting lost. Ending up in The Bronx at one point and finally making it to the hospital after 13 hours on the road. Finally arriving exhausted they were greeted with the news that there was a mix-up. The apartment they were promised as part of Dr. Valliquette's arrangement was not available. They were told that they would have to live in a small apartment attached to one of the patient wards.

Dr. Valiquette brought along two other Canadian residents, and they went to the Main Office and said they would return to Canada if they did not get the promised apartment the next day.



The children of the doctors.

Arrangements were made and they were placed in a three-bedroom apartment in Building 128-Family Housing (one of four buildings grouped together at the far north end of the property).

Huguette recalls that when the woman showed them to the apartment, she slipped and fell on the rug and she was so tired, she wanted to laugh.

Despite the rough start, Huguette said that the years they spent living at the Psych Center were very happy. There were sixteen families living in their group of building (four families in each of four buildings). They were from all over: Poland, Columbia, Portugal, Switzerland, Turkey, Brazil and Iran. A lot of the other children didn't speak English, but the kids always played together. It was like 'a little United Nations,' she said. Many of the doctors had studied abroad in their country and were working at the hospital on an extended visa.

Huguette said that there was a routine at the residences. They were given a choice of meals daily, and a list of food they could order from that would be delivered to them once a week by patients on honor card. All of their clothes were laundered, pressed and folded for them, again with the patients involved.

Sometimes there were mix-ups. Huguette said one time she asked for 12 bananas. Instead, they brought her 12 bunches of bananas. So she delivered them to all the neighbors.

The apartment had three bedrooms, living room and kitchen and was completely furnished, including new mattresses and sheets. The bathroom had one room for a shower, one for a tub, and two stalls for toilets and a sink. There was a long hallway connecting the apartments and the children would play there or just outside.

She remembered that the telephone bill was \$1.25 a month. "These were the days...that did not last," she said.

It was also very safe, Huguette said. No one dared to come to the hospital. It had its own police and fire department. When the Valiquettes had visitors over, they would have to report to the police, who would escort them to the house, since it was hard to find.

Huguette emphasized how much the family really loved Kings Park. They would go to the nearby beaches, have picnics and grill at Sunken Meadow, take trips to Robert Moses State Park and Manhattan. The children went to RJO elementary school when they were older.

"We thought we only might stay for a year," she said.

They stayed for six.



Building 128 today, where the Valiquettes lived.