

'Nobody Works Too Hard Here'

BY WILLIAM JONES

It is called the Kenmore House Nursing Home and it is a reminder that for many of our elderly poor the golden years are a cruel trick filled with dreary, smelly rooms, incompetent staff and meals consisting of table scraps.

I worked at Kenmore House and the filth is everywhere.

The stench first hits an outsider at the basement level entrance and gets worse as you ride a rickety elevator to the upper floors of the converted transient hotel. One of the most foul-smelling rooms on the fourth floor, occupied by three elderly men, is directly across the hall from the dining area. The stench from the room is so strong that it carries into the dining area.

Begins Work as Mopboy

The floors in some of the rooms are so filthy that the day I began work as a mopboy my efforts to mop the floors created muddy swaths across the cracked tile floors. In another room, where the bathroom window was broken and replaced with clear glass, the patients have taped an old bath towel across the window to afford a degree of privacy.

The home has been the target of numerous city health department complaints in the last year, yet continues to receive more than \$250,000 a year from public aid for patient care.

I obtained the job after an interview with the administrator, Rabbi Benjamin Cohen, who made no secret of the fact that he was not happy with my out-of-town work experience.

Questions Credentials

"You have no roots, you just wander around," Cohen said. "How can I check you out? I can't hire you without any references. I'm in trouble now with the Board of Health now because I hired a guy without checking him out and he started roughing up the patients."

I insisted I was willing to work for less than \$2 an hour, however, and a week later

Cohen decided to take a chance.

"This guy says he wants to work as a maintenance man," Cohen told his head houseman. "You talk to him. He seems a little eager to me."

William Recktenwald, a Better Government Association investigator, also applied for work as a janitor and apparently made a better impression, despite similar phony references.

"This is a nice young fellow," Cohen told his director of nursing. "Let's make him a nurse."

"We can't make him a nurse," the nursing director responded. "He has no training. He couldn't dispense medication without training."

"He's a nice personable young man," Cohen said. "Make him a nurse and he can dispense medication. I'm sure he can catch on quickly."

The next day Recktenwald was given a set of keys to the narcotics and medicine cabinets and worked the next two days as a nurse.

My own introduction to work as a mopboy was handled in a slightly different manner. On the day I reported for work, another houseman who was washing his underwear in the basement was told to show me the ropes. It was his day off and he was still drunk from the previous night.

As we moved from floor to floor I found my fellow worker walking into walls and cursing his bad fortune at having to spend even a minute of his day off showing a new man around.

"If you see something laying around sweep it up," I was told. "You know, just look busy. Nobody breaks their —around here. "Do you drink?" When I responded that I did on occasion he said:

"Well, I've got a bottle down in my locker and I better get to it."

With that he disappeared and I was left to clean the fourth floor. No disinfectants are used in cleaning the floors or toilets and the head houseman related that such chemicals only streak the floors.

My pail of mop water had turned black by the time I had completed the first room. Linen and blankets are grimy and the wastebaskets in each room are so dirty they resemble garbage cans.

Pills Fall on Floor

During my chores on the fourth floor I also observed a nurse's aide preparing the mid-morning medication. She stood in front of a medicine closet with a variety of pills scattered at her feet where they had been dropped and never retrieved.

As she prepared each dosage I noticed a unique cost-cutting device. She was reusing several crumpled wax paper pill cups stashed in the bottom of the medicine cart with no apparent knowledge of who had previously used the cups.

It was not the first cost-cutting scheme uncovered at Kenmore. While Recktenwald worked as a nurse, he also helped feed the patients. One night, when the evening meal had been sent to the 37 patients living on the second floor, it quickly became apparent that there would not be enough to go around.

Solves Meal Problem

A licensed practical nurse working with Recktenwald said this happened frequently. Then she and Recktenwald began gathering the trays of those who had finished eating and set about solving the problem.

All of the leftover steamed cabbage and noodles were

tray were scraped onto new trays and fed to other patients. What they didn't eat was again scraped onto fresh trays until the evening meal was completed.

When Recktenwald returned to the home a few days later a nurse was complaining about large quantities of narcotics missing from the drug cabinet. This was her solution to the problem: "The drug and narcotic records are all messed up. We have big shortages on some of the narcotics. He [the administrator] had better get that pharmacist over here to phony up the records. I'm not going to get in trouble for this."