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Interview has been edited for clarity. Timestamps correspond to the original, unedited video.

The language and terminology used in these historical materials reflect the context and culture of the interviewee(s), and may include stereotypes in words, phrases, and attitudes that were wrong then and are wrong now. Rather than remove this content, Western Pennsylvania Disability History and Action Consortium wants to acknowledge its harmful impact, learn from it, and spark conversation to create a more inclusive future together.

Tina Calabro ([00:00:00](#)):

My name is Tina Calabro and I'm the Multimedia Histories Coordinator for the Western Pennsylvania Disability History and Action Consortium. We are here at Polk Center in Venango County. It's Thursday, December 5th, at 10:30 AM. The purpose of the Multimedia Histories project of the Western Pennsylvania Disability History and Action Consortium is to record firsthand accounts of disability history. Polk State Center is part of that history.

Today we are interviewing Shirley Pickens who has served as director of Polk Center since 2008, and has been on staff here since 1981. She will retire as director in January, 2020. Thank you, Shirley.

Shirley Pickens ([00:02:46](#)):

Thank you, Tina.

Tina Calabro ([00:02:47](#)):

Let's begin by talking about your years at Polk. You began serving as director of Polk Center in 2008, 11 years ago, but you began working here in 1981. How did your early life lead you to Polk?

Shirley Pickens ([00:03:05](#)):

I grew up in a small town, Sandy Lake. It's about five or six miles up the road from here. Polk Center was always something I was very aware of. Actually my grandmother worked here. My aunt had worked here as an LPN [Licensed Practical Nurse] at one time and at one point my sister worked here also for a while, for quite a while actually. So I was always aware of Polk Center. I had been to many of the activities here. The parades that were incredible when I was a kid. I remember coming to those. Though I had not really intended to work here, quite honestly. I went to college and my bachelor's is in art history and I needed to work somewhere for a little while.

Shirley Pickens ([00:03:55](#)):

My plan was to work for three years and save up some money and go back to school and go get my master's [degree] in art history. That was my plan when I walked in here, and I started. I probably should tell you this, I started as direct care. So I started out working on the cottages with the people that live here. It was pretty shocking when I first came here. The cottages were not as nice as they are today. They were actually pretty sterile-looking but somehow there were still, there was unpleasant aromas. They didn't smell good. There was not comfortable furniture for people to sit on, to live in.

Shirley Pickens ([00:04:49](#)):

One of the reasons I went into art history, I have some talent. I'm not the most talented artist, but I have some talent and I wanted to be in the art field. I had considered art, being an art teacher. I did just a little bit of that in high school, some helping out in the art room with the younger children, and realized that the idea of being that responsible for people's lives scared the heck out of me. So, that was another part that really scared the heck out of me too.

Shirley Pickens ([00:05:29](#)):

I was suddenly faced in a job [at Polk] where these people needed me. They needed me for everything. So that was pretty scary. I got through my first probably six weeks. You're in training, you're in class. You're in classroom part of the time. Might have only been four weeks at that time, and you're in the living areas for part of the day working. And I'll tell you, when I went home at night, I was living with my parents. I went home every night and I was so upset by the environment and what I had seen during the day. I basically laid on the couch and cried every night. Told my mother... I'm going to get emotional, sorry. [Tears up]

Shirley Pickens ([00:06:14](#)):

I told my mother. She'd say, "Are you okay?" I told her that I had a cold. "I'm having a terrible cold and I'm starting to work and it's stressful." Because all it would've taken was for her to say... If I had said I don't think I can do this, she would have said you don't have to, and I wouldn't have come back. I wanted to come back, so I worked through that. But I will say that as I got to working with the people and got to meet them and understand them, I found great satisfaction in helping people and I still to this day, when I meet with the new classes, when we get new classes of staff that come in, I always talk to them about those days that I worked in direct care -- I don't think we were called RSAs [Residential Services Aides] then in direct care -- and how important it was.

Shirley Pickens ([00:07:24](#)):

I try to impart this on them also that there's so much that people need support with and help with and to learn, but you're also helping people live their lives and lives should be happy and fun. And so I always try to share that and share that we can help people have fun and still meet all of our regulations and do all of those things that we have to do. And that's always a big part of what I try to share with new staff, and that goes back to my very first days here. Of course, I've seen a lot of changes. When I go out to the living areas now, I can tell you they're clean, they're neat. They do not have odors. They do not have unpleasant odors. That would be totally unacceptable.

Tina Calabro ([00:08:27](#)):

You said that you started as a direct support staff person. And then you moved on to some other jobs after that.

Shirley Pickens ([00:08:37](#)):

I did. I did keep that promise to myself. My intention was when I came here, my promise to myself was I was going to work three years and I was going to quit and go back to school. It was going to be in art history at that time. I did keep that promise to myself in part. I did after three years. I did not quit, obviously I kept working, but I did go back to school. That made me eligible for some other jobs. My second job here after direct care was a casework trainee and then a caseworker. Then I went into the

psych department because that's actually what I went back to school for was a master's [degree] in psychology. And I worked for the longest period of time here in the psych department as a psych associate. Got some really good opportunities there that I'll probably talk about later actually. Went from there into the quality assurance department and from there to the Director [of Quality Assurance].

Tina Calabro ([00:09:49](#)):

Shirley, you talked about in those early years that you were here as a direct staff worker, that over time you felt a transformation within yourself about being here. You talked about once you met the people and you got to know them, and then there was this transformation. That happened in those early years when you were a direct staff care person?

Shirley Pickens ([00:10:12](#)):

Yeah. Oh, absolutely.

Tina Calabro ([00:10:14](#)):

And are there other elements to that transformation that you went through at that time?

Shirley Pickens ([00:10:23](#)):

And at the time, the group of people that I worked with were probably, they were considered the most challenging people on grounds. We went through special training to work in that area. There were a lot of times when it was not a pleasant job. You have to remember that this was in the early '80s and medications were not what they are today. We were running on a very strict behavioral protocol, which actually had some benefit but it also, we learned very early on that helping people be happy and have a good day made a difference in how your day was. So if you wanted to go in and have a pretty good evening, you had to start to understand, okay, what makes this person excited? What makes them interested? What's going to help them have a good night, because that's going to help us all have a good night.

Shirley Pickens ([00:12:05](#)):

We really started to focus on, even though it wasn't part of the plans that we were following under or even the philosophy really that we were following under, there was kind of a group of us that said, "Okay, we're going to do this. We're going to follow what we're supposed to follow. We're going to follow all the rules. But in between those rules, we can help build better lives for people." And later, many of those things are very much like [the] "Everyday Lives" [philosophy]. I've always thought, and this kind of spilled over to when I was in the psych department too, really it's helping people. A lot of times the people that we were working with had lives where they hadn't been very successful. They'd had relationships that weren't very successful, often with their families. They had often come from somewhere else. They frequently were new admissions that had been not successful in their homes, and they felt unsuccessful.

Shirley Pickens ([00:13:19](#)):

So, a lot of times it was kind of narrowing down their choices, which isn't something you want to do forever with somebody. But kind of narrowing it down so that they can be successful all the time for a while. and help them build that confidence. That was interesting and rewarding and helped change how I thought about people.

Tina Calabro ([00:13:53](#)):

It sounds like that was part of your understanding of your decision to stay here and to continue working here.

Shirley Pickens ([00:14:02](#)):

Absolutely, yes. I felt like I was doing something that was really helping some people and found out I really liked doing that.

Tina Calabro ([00:14:27](#)):

You had the different jobs through the years leading up to you becoming director. What did you learn from the various jobs that you had along the way? What did you learn from the jobs and what did you learn from the people that you worked with, including the residents?

Shirley Pickens ([00:15:45](#)):

I think the biggest thing I learned, and it's helped me through everything actually, through every job I've ever had, is to keep my focus very clearly on what the person that I'm serving, the person I'm here to support, what they need and how can I help them with that. It sounds very simplistic, but as long as you're doing things that are the best for the person you're supporting, you're going to come out all right. Things are going to work out. It's really when we start thinking about all those cross needs, our own needs and needs of other employees that we start to make missteps. And as long as we're focused on what that person needs, like I said, we usually come out okay.

Tina Calabro ([00:16:48](#)):

Were there certain people who guided you and mentored you along the way?

Shirley Pickens ([00:16:55](#)):

Yes. I was really lucky to have the support of the licensed ... Yeah, he would have been a licensed psychology manager. Actually when I first started in direct care, he was very supportive. And then he was my boss later on when I was a PSA [Psychological Services Associate]. So he was very influential in how I felt. And honestly, he didn't always agree with how I thought about things because he was kind of a pure behaviorist at the time. I think he has changed some now, but he was kind of a pure behaviorist and I was a little more of the touchy feely, let's find out what people really like and makes them happy.

Shirley Pickens ([00:17:46](#)):

I've already said my success theory, he didn't completely agree with that. He thought it was just a behavioral forum at the time. But he was supportive anyways. Supportive so much that he took me to do a presentation with him one time and I was to give my theory, even though he didn't agree with it. So I felt that was quite kind of him. By the way, I got too nervous and couldn't give it. I sat down and didn't do the speech at all. That was kind of funny. I had some really good opportunities.

Shirley Pickens ([00:18:23](#)):

Somehow, and I truly don't know how I got on this group, I was put on what's called the advisory panel and it was to work with people that had challenging behaviors. And it was a group of us that were... actually there were like two or three of the other facility directors at the time. I was a PSA at the time, they were facility directors. I was pretty much in awe of them. And there were several people from

central office. And then there were a couple trainers, some other people, and we went from center to center and looked at the most challenging people that they had there and offered them ideas on how to support them and gave information.

Shirley Pickens ([00:19:12](#)):

That was a really good experience. First of all, I got to watch people that were in positions that I never thought I would be in and how they worked and what they did. And I got to know a lot of people. I got to know a lot of people out there in other facilities and in other agencies. That was a really good experience. And hopefully, I think I helped some people too at their end.

Tina Calabro ([00:19:42](#)):

You mention the concept of "Everyday Lives." Could you say just a little bit more about what that concept is? That's a statewide concept here in Pennsylvania. Could you speak more about that?

Shirley Pickens ([00:19:55](#)):

Probably not going to do it justice, but "Everyday Lives" is kind of the guiding philosophy that in essence it is that people with disabilities want what all of us want. It's just how to support people through normal living.

Tina Calabro ([00:20:20](#)):

And back in your early years here [starting] in 1981, what was the daily life like here in that first decade, let's say.

Shirley Pickens ([00:20:41](#)):

I would say from about '84, '83 maybe on, we had a lot of people being admitted here. So that was the timeframe when we had a lot of people that were being admitted here that had challenging behaviors. We were considered one of the premier places to support people with challenges. There was a lot going on here. There was a lot of work with... It gave us a young population that wanted to do a lot of things. I'm going to talk mostly about the people I worked with at that time because, honestly, at that time, as a PSA, I really only knew the 86 to 100 people that I worked a lot with.

Shirley Pickens ([00:22:09](#)):

I knew there were a lot of other people out there. I knew some of their names, but I wasn't that familiar with what was going on with them. So I can't really speak to that. But the groups that I worked with, they would get up in the morning. That was regimented, what time you got up. You got up so that everybody would get up about the same time because we needed to get breakfast and get out to work. They typically made their own breakfast in the area. They typically all went to work. They typically worked mostly in sheltered workshops on grounds. There were a few times when we got people jobs in the community as far as like they would get out to the workshop in Seneca.

Shirley Pickens ([00:23:11](#)):

We did start at that time doing some work in the community outside of typical workshops. We still do a lot of those things actually. We had [a contract with Dairy Queen], until the Dairy Queen closed about a year and a half maybe ago, maybe two years now. I can't remember. We'd had a contract with them where we took people up and they did the cleaning. Basically did cleaning and custodial jobs up there.

We'd had that for close to twenty years. And we also had a mobile work crew that went out and still do. We started the mobile work crew that goes down and cleans windows in a lot of downtown Franklin. For a while we were doing the post office. We're not right now. We do clean the church downtown here in Polk. A lot of those things started then.

Shirley Pickens ([00:24:16](#)):

We've always had a lot of activities that we do here as far as a lot of things like, there's bingo in the evenings. There's bands that come in. There's dances. I'm trying to think just of our typical things. Those all were happening then. That's about the time we opened up the pool. The pool was built and was opened. That was somewhat of a struggle at first because people [staff] did not want to go to the pool. People that worked here did not want to go and get in the pool and swim. We've solved that. We've put that in everyone's job descriptions.

Shirley Pickens ([00:25:04](#)):

We still have a lot of these things. Some of them have changed because the people that live here have changed. But that's when we opened the "Our Place," which is a small... It was kind of like we developed it as a little nightclub bar-type place for people. And actually when we originally opened it in that timeframe, we served "near beer" there. And some of the people that were there, that was pretty cool. They liked that. They liked going to get a glass of "near beer" in the evening. It caused us a little bit of problems, so we ended up discontinuing that. Plus, I will say, too, the people that were most interested in those things were the people that during some placement initiatives were able to be placed. So there was much less interest in things like a "near beer." That's not really something anybody here right now is asking for.

Tina Calabro ([00:26:10](#)):

When you say people were beginning to be placed, do you mean in homes in the community?

Shirley Pickens ([00:26:15](#)):

Yes.

Tina Calabro ([00:26:16](#)):

Could you say a little bit more? That was starting to happen in the 1980s?

Shirley Pickens ([00:26:20](#)):

Actually, I mean, there was a large placement initiative into group homes in the mid '70s before I came. But I had heard some of that. And then when I was a casework trainee – no, I think I was a caseworker at the time – we had a placement initiative and placed, not as large a group, but a significant number of people into community homes at that time. I think we do a better job of that now. There's more planning, there's more working with the community, having the community work with the person. We go out and spend time in the home with the person to help the people that are going to be working with them understand how to support them. Then it was usually maybe one or two visits and the person moved.

Shirley Pickens ([00:27:22](#)):

That was not the best way to do it, but it was how things were done at that time. There was a big initiative called the five-year plan and that was around 1997. A lot of people moved from here to the community at that time. And there was a lot more planning we did. We call them essential lifestyle plans now. They were basically the same thing. We did a plan then talking about what the person needed, liked, wanted.

Tina Calabro ([00:28:13](#)): Is it called person-centered planning?

Shirley Pickens ([00:28:15](#)):

Person-centered planning. Thank you. I knew I should remember that. Yeah, we became very proficient at doing person-centered plans. And a lot of people moved out and were very successful, very successful.

Tina Calabro ([00:28:33](#)):

When you arrived here in the early '80s, you came in at a time where there was a significant chapter of history that had just happened in the two decades before you arrived. The '60s and the '70s had brought changes to Polk. There was some intense advocacy at that time, especially in the early '70s, to alert the state to overcrowding at Polk. And there was a lot of attention to the use of cages here at Polk as well. The superintendent at that time was fired. What insights have you gained over your tenure that reflect back on the previous era?

Shirley Pickens ([00:30:38](#)):

Sure. Even in real time when those things were being disclosed in the '70s, I remember hearing about those. I was in high school at the time. It was shocking to hear that people were kept in cages. It was shocking. I don't think I understood or heard about things like people being kept in straitjackets all day until I came here. But I actually know people or knew people that lived here that ... they walked around [with their arms] like this all day [crosses arms to demonstrate a straitjacket restraint]. And when you would ask, why do they do that? Because as a new employee you ask a lot of, why does someone do that? Kind of people would whisper and say in sort of an ashamed manner, "That's somebody that lived in a straitjacket all the time and that's how they hold themselves now."

Shirley Pickens ([00:31:44](#)):

It sort of has always haunted all of us here quite honestly. We're always trying to prove that we're not that place anymore, and we're not. We're really, really not. But I feel like we always have to be on edge proving that. I will say, and boy, I'm not at all defending the use of straitjackets at that point, although we did use straitjackets when I first started here. It was a terrible thing. I can't even really talk about that.

Shirley Pickens ([00:32:35](#)):

When I look back though, and I think, well, they had around 60 people is what I've been told, living in an area where we now have eight people that live there. They live there pretty comfortably. But we have eight people, they had 60. They probably had two to three staff, maybe four, maybe not. I don't think they called in overtime if one staff didn't show up, so it [the number of staff] would go down. Maybe they would plan for four but only three showed up that day. Somebody was sick, whatever.

Shirley Pickens ([00:33:15](#)):

I honestly am not sure how you would provide any type of quality of life for people in those situations. You always hear the story of people coming in and finding these awful conditions and being shocked, and I don't blame them one bit. I would be shocked, too, and saddened actually. Going to the director and saying, "We want you to go back and release the cages right now." And the director saying, "No, I can't." Coming from as an administrator, I think I feel sorry for him because he probably couldn't. He didn't have enough staff to keep anybody safe in that day and age. I don't know if he had asked for more staff and been denied. I don't know what those circumstances were.

Shirley Pickens ([00:34:18](#)):

I don't know whether there had been steps that had been tried to make changes before then or not. I will say I am so glad things changed. I would not be here today if that's what we were. I could not, that just wouldn't have happened.

Tina Calabro ([00:35:23](#)):

There have been in the last few decades legal challenges to institutionalization, and there's been a shift in society's attitudes toward people with disabilities and towards inclusion, including the Americans with Disabilities Act. And so I wanted to ask you, how did these changes over the last 40 years, let's say, shape Polk during your time here?

Shirley Pickens ([00:36:21](#)):

Right after I came, they were getting ready to go for medical assistance, to become a medical assistance facility. That made huge changes. The building that I started out working in was Gardenside.

Shirley Pickens ([00:37:15](#)):

There I saw some changes as far as like reduction of number of people living in the living area, separations of bedrooms. We have the pony walls mostly, but we have walls for people and more privacy in the bedroom areas where bedroom areas were just long rows of beds originally. In fact, my husband worked here about five or six years before I started. He has told me stories about going in to help make beds in the morning and you had to move one bed over a little bit so you could walk in between to make the bed because that's how close they were sleeping.

Shirley Pickens ([00:38:03](#)):

Under medical assistance, you have to have a certain amount of square feet. I think it's 80 square feet for a bedroom area and you have to have some privacy. So, that was a huge change. And to me, that would be a really meaningful change to have a little private space of your own. And we worked really hard to help people decorate those areas, to get things that they wanted in them, things they liked. That was probably some of the first times people had gotten to choose some of their items. What would you like for a bedspread? What would you like hanging on your wall? And they, a lot of times didn't know how to answer that question and they didn't know if they could have those decisions. Really, medical assistance, that makes a huge difference becoming an intermediate care facility because it carries with it a lot of regulations and a lot of expectations that make changes.

Shirley Pickens ([00:39:10](#)):

The other change has been slower and has just been part of changing who we are and changing how we focus in what we believe in. There's been a lot of training with all of us, with all staff here. I think a really

good way to explain that to people is I remember when, as part of us becoming an ICF-MR [Intermediate Care Facility-Mental Retardation], you had to develop a human rights committee. And that was people from the community, people that worked here, it was a cross section. And I've been trying to add to the people on that committee right now because we lose people. People move, they take other jobs, people in the community get busy doing something else. So I've been reaching out and adding onto the committee.

Shirley Pickens ([00:40:05](#)):

Part of it was, what made me think of this was, they said, "Well, what do you do with this committee? What do they talk about?" And I harken back to the things that came up at human rights committee 20, 25, 30 years ago. And that committee really had to, they were really active and they really had to fight for, "Joe wants a tattoo" or "Joe wants to go and do this." The system basically wasn't helpful to that and people weren't always very responsive to that and they had been told no. So that community was very active and very much trying to change what people were doing.

Shirley Pickens ([00:40:57](#)):

Now, if somebody came in and said, "Hey, Joe's going to go get a tattoo. Any problem with that?" My answer, but I think everybody's answer, would be, "Well, he probably should check with the doctor and make sure there's no medical issues, but sure." Or if somebody wants this, it's just such a change. Really that committee now is mostly looking at some regulatory things that are required. Any problems could be brought to them and we remind people of that. But we all have a more advocate stance that we are all looking at. Well, if they want it, it's how are we going to have this happen; not, "No, you can't do that." And yes, there are some times, there's things that we still aren't able to support people to do here, but they're few and far between really.

Tina Calabro ([00:41:58](#)):

We've talked about the state and federal changes that have impacted Polk. You've been the director here for 11 years. How have you helped shape Polk yourself?

Shirley Pickens ([00:42:12](#)):

I would like to take credit for some of what I've just said, that we are more of a place in looking at how we can help the people that live here do what they want to do and not just fit into our regulations and not just fit in. Although, believe me, I'm very much, "We have to follow the regulations." But we can do that and still help people do what they want to do. Not too long ago, a young man that lives here told me he wants to drive in a demolition derby. My response was, "Well, okay. Talk to your team. We have to figure out a way to make this safe."

Shirley Pickens ([00:43:09](#)):

I have to worry about safety. Safety is always first. Talk to the team. I don't know all the rules. I don't know all the regulations for the demolition derby themselves. I don't know if you need insurance. I don't know if you need a driver's license. I don't know any of those things. But if they can work it out so it's safe and that he can legally enter, that's good. And that's what I'm hoping, that I have given that focus on what people want and that what people want is the most important thing, and we need to figure it out.

Tina Calabro ([00:43:46](#)):

Would you say that those kinds of things have been your greatest satisfaction over the past 11 years?

Shirley Pickens ([00:43:52](#)):

Absolutely. Yes, yeah.

Tina Calabro ([00:43:54](#)):

What about challenges over the period of time that you've been director, what kind of challenges have you encountered?

Shirley Pickens ([00:44:02](#)):

Wow, lots of them. Things you don't even expect. Probably one of the biggest challenges for me, and I am so lucky that I have been able to put together a management team that is really, they're exceptional. They're really great people. But I'm often asked to give opinions and make decisions about things like water treatment plants. Not something I know anything about. Those are the things that come out of left field at me. Some of the challenges, of course, are ensuring that we have good staffing, that staff are properly trained. There are training initiatives that come down from ODP [Pennsylvania Office of Developmental Programs], which have been wonderful. We've also been able to start a few of our own training initiatives here that I think have been really great.

Shirley Pickens ([00:45:11](#)):

“Reaching Beyond” was one of them we started and it was truly just trying to get ... I'm always worried that there's a number of us that have a lot of opportunities and a lot of education and a lot of... I'm not talking about myself, I'm talking about a lot of professional staff and management staff. And yet that direct care worker on afternoon shift, they need that information and it's hard to get that information to them. So “Reaching Beyond” was really a way to try and get that at least basic information out to everybody that goes beyond what our normal training is.

Shirley Pickens ([00:45:56](#)):

It's a great little program. It talks about different ways of using communication. It addresses anxiety and how to help people relax. Just different. I think there's like 40 modules in it. I mean, it's a lot. I think that's been an achievement.

Shirley Pickens ([00:46:30](#)):

We've always had a very strong vocational department here. We have a wonderful greenhouse cement shop. We have great places that people can work. The direction now is to get people more in the community. We've always done a lot of that. But we've done it usually through subcontracts with us. We're trying to get people more actual working and getting a paycheck in the community. So that change has been a challenge.

Shirley Pickens ([00:47:12](#)):

We also have great day programmings that aren't paid programmings, but they are mostly [at] the senior center. However, we do have some people here that, because of their medical fragility, that's typically it, they're not able to get out and access those programs. That really bothered me that there were people that were not able to experience the richness of what we have to offer. So one of the

things I'm really proud of is really beefing up and really improving the day-to-day programming activities that are offered in each building.

Shirley Pickens ([00:47:57](#)):

Actually even the dentist goes out [to each building at Polk] and does a program with people [residents] once a month in each building.... So it's really everybody goes out to the [living areas]. The OT/PT people [occupational and physical therapists] do a program with everyone beyond what their normal therapy would be. Does that make sense? And they're wonderful activities. People are enjoying them and they're learning things. And it's people that were really ... I think they were underserved. They were not getting the richness that they could have. I'm not saying it's 100% yet. I'm really not. I don't think I've ever said we're at 100% on anything, but we've improved that and actually we were just talking the other day, yesterday, with the new director of program services about some ideas that he has to improve that even more. So, that's been a challenge just to make sure everybody is involved.

Tina Calabro ([00:49:03](#)):

Now, your title is "director" but the former title for that position was "superintendent." Could you tell us a bit about what is the difference between those two titles? We understand that the superintendent, previously when there was that title, lived on the campus. Could you tell us about that home and is it still standing?

Shirley Pickens ([00:49:25](#)):

I've tried to think of what is the difference between the superintendent and the facility director. The superintendent did not have the management team like I do. They had basically the superintendent and the assistant superintendent. So they were making the decisions on medications. Now I have a director of program services, a clinical director. All the decision-making and pointing things in the right direction came from that one person. Whereas now it's more of a team approach. I think that's probably the biggest difference. I think they [superintendents] were revered more than a director, although people are very respectful.

Shirley Pickens ([00:50:36](#)):

The director's house or the superintendent's house is still standing and it's still in good basic condition. If someone were going to live there, they would probably have to do some updating. But you could live there if you just painted up a few rooms and you could live there very, very comfortably. At this point in time, actually, no one has lived in it for a number of years. The director that was here in like 2004 to 2006, right around in that time, she did live there. When the director's house was first opened, I believe that was just something you got as part of the job. If I wanted to live there, I would have to pay rent and there's a scale for that. I think that they have made it that if, unless it is a necessary part of your job, unless it's in your job description that you have to be here all the time, you have to pay rent commensurate with what's going on in the community.

Tina Calabro ([00:51:57](#)):

Let's talk briefly about this main building that we're in and also the entire campus of about 2000 acres. How are different parts of the campus used now? And we understand that there was once a working farm here, a lake and a reservoir, and that there's an interesting story about what happened to the reservoir. Are there other interesting stories about the evolution of this property?

Shirley Pickens ([00:52:22](#)):

The interesting story that I'm most familiar with is the lake. The lake was created by a dam that was under a road that, honestly, I don't think most of us realized was a dam. I believe it was in around 2005, I'm forgetting the exact time right now, maybe 2006. There was a torrential storm and Sandy Creek flooded. That's the creek that goes through the town of Polk, and our dam was breached. The dam went up here. I believe that may have been part of flooding the town. I'm not really sure. It was quite an event though. Actually, most of the people from town, maybe not all of them but most of them, actually came up here as their rescue area. The Red Cross came in, we set up beds in the gym. We had the halls lined with pets and animals, all of those things. I don't know if people really know that happened, but that did happen.

Shirley Pickens ([00:53:46](#)):

Actually we miss the lake. The lake was a destination to walk to in the evenings. A lot of people went out and walked down to the lake. That was very much of a destination. We had a pontoon boat on the lake for awhile. There were picnics beside the lake. We really do miss the lake and would have liked to have reinstated it. There were a lot of meetings about that. One of the deputy secretaries got tired of hearing about it and started to refer to it as the "damn dam" when we talked about it, and I don't blame him. [laughter]

Shirley Pickens ([00:54:35](#)):

But it ended up, for cost effectiveness, we did not rebuild the dam. We have a small fire pond where it was. It's not the same though. It's not nearly the entertainment. There was a lot of fishing that went on in there too. I forgot that. And that was always kind of a nice thing because the community came to fish there. So there was a lot of interaction between the people that live here and the people from the community at the old fishing hole. So we do miss it.

Tina Calabro ([00:55:13](#)):

Are there other interesting points to make about different parts of the campus and how they're used today or how they were used in the past?

Shirley Pickens ([00:55:25](#)):

I wasn't here when the farm was up and running. Of course, I was familiar with the farm, and I think one of the really interesting things was, and that changed because of the peonage laws, and that's another good thing. One of the things I'm really thankful for of the people that were in charge at that time, they looked at areas like our greenhouse that is now a vocational area. They didn't look at it as, oh, we're going to close the greenhouse. They looked at it as, we're going to change this. We're going to turn it into a work site so that we can still have this really nice greenhouse system going, but we changed it.

Shirley Pickens ([00:56:18](#)):

Some of the old barns were made into workshops where our ceramics center is over there. There's a carwash in one of the old barns in one of the bays. I really appreciated that because I think that that's been a richness that we've had. We had a laundry here for a long time. I think it's only been about three years ago that we stopped doing our own laundry and started having that done by the Department of Corrections. There's been some growing pains on that on both sides but that has worked out. Gardenside was the building I started in. It has been razed and is no longer there although, and you

probably have noticed this there, it looks strange because we kept the basement. The reason we kept the basement is that a lot of our electrical wiring and our heating system is underground. So we had to keep the basement because it's part of the system.

Tina Calabro ([00:57:35](#)):

You referred to the peonage laws. Could you explain what that references and how that relates to Polk?

Shirley Pickens ([00:57:41](#)):

Sure. I think that was very much a factor in Polk and it was actually, I think it goes back to what we were talking about with the changes in the '70s. Peonage basically is that people were working and weren't getting paid. The people that lived here, a lot of them were very capable and they worked in the farm, they worked on making clothes, they made rugs, they repaired shoes. I don't think they actually made shoes, but there was shoe repair. They actually helped take care of other people that didn't have as many abilities that lived here. There was actually a father of someone that lives here, not too long ago we were talking and he was talking about, and I can't remember her name, but there was a woman that lived here who was assigned when his daughter came here at about age five to take care of his daughter.

Shirley Pickens ([00:58:56](#)):

He has some very fond memories of her because she was actually a caregiver that was here all the time for his daughter. It wasn't like somebody that worked here and went home. She was here and she was with his daughter all the time. Those things were all stopped when basically the government stepped in and said, "Look, when people are working, they have to be paid." And I'm not sure that that didn't lead to some of the problems. And again, I'm not defending that. I'm just trying to look into how these things happen. How do we get people being put in cages? I'm not sure that there was just a timeframe there where that help that they'd relied on of the people that lived here and the staff that they had. They didn't have enough staff to make up that difference. So they went to some desperate measures. My opinion is that's what could have happened.

Shirley Pickens ([01:00:45](#)):

For as long as I've been here, we've had really strong vocational programs. Right now, we have 194 people live here. We probably have 124 that have some type of employment, and everybody makes minimum wage or better. We actually, when we worked on making sure everyone made minimum wage about, that's probably a year, a year and a half ago, we switched over to see what everyone did. We realized we had a number of people that were already way above that, so we didn't reduce their wage.

Tina Calabro ([01:01:29](#)):

The population of Polk today is under 200 people. Could you tell us about the demographics of the people that live here today? What's it like to live here now? What's a typical day like? And for the people who live here, what kind of relationships do they have with either the community at large or with their families, visits and so forth?

Shirley Pickens ([01:01:51](#)):

Okay. Well, there's 192 people living here right now. The average age is 62. We do have probably a group of 10 to 15 people that are much younger than that though, that are in their early 20s basically,

they're in early 20s to 30s. A lot of our people need a lot of support with using a wheelchair or some type of assistance for movements, particularly long distances. A lot of people are okay within the cottage area, but when we go out to the community or even out to work, here they need to use a wheelchair for that traveling. A typical day, honestly there's a lot of typical days here in that it depends on what you want to do in that day.

Shirley Pickens ([01:02:54](#)):

But a typical day, we still typically get up pretty early, get moving, get breakfast. There are people that go out to senior center, people that go out to workshops, people that don't do those things, they go to the activities in their building. Having said that, I will say we are much more likely to have people sleeping in on weekends than we were 25 years ago because most of us get up Monday through Friday and we get busy and get doing our work. And then maybe we sleep in a little on weekends. We try to reflect that too.

Shirley Pickens ([01:03:38](#)):

In the evenings we still have a lot of the same types of activities we had 20, 30 years ago. We have bingo, we have swimming, dances, activities, plays. People come in and do things. We have musicians come in and play on a pretty routine basis. We have a small group that volunteer to come in and play for us two or three times a month. So those are the kind of activities that are going on.

Tina Calabro ([01:04:18](#)):

What about visitors? The people who live here, do they receive visitors here?

Shirley Pickens ([01:04:23](#)):

Yeah, absolutely. We encourage family to come and visit. We don't have any regulations about when you can visit or that you have to notify us ahead or anything like that. We do typically ask that you don't come in the middle of the night ... I guess I should say we don't ask that people let us know they're coming. We don't insist on it. We do ask that, though, because we've had people come unannounced and their son, daughter, brother, sister are not here because they're out in the community.

Shirley Pickens ([01:05:14](#)):

Our goal is that everyone gets into a community activity at least once a month. We have people that we struggle to do that with and we have other people that, gosh, there's one guy who he goes fishing four nights a week, five nights a week and goes other places. That's sort of based on what their abilities are, what their desires are and what their physical health is. That plays a huge piece in that.

Shirley Pickens ([01:05:46](#)):

Right around 22 people live here that don't have any family involvement at all. And then the others, it varies We have one mother that comes once a month and stays for a week ... She lives actually in I think it's Wisconsin now. So she flies in once a month and spends a week in town and is here every day and goes to work with her son. Does absolutely everything. We have other families that come up a couple of times a month and visit. We have other families that they send cards. They send presents, which we greatly appreciate, that people love to get. But that's all they can do right now.

Shirley Pickens ([01:06:46](#)):

Our population is older, so it's less likely to be their parents. It's more likely to be a brother or a sister, a niece or a nephew. Those are probably the most frequent, brothers and sisters. Sometimes when you go to connect to a niece or a nephew, they haven't had much of a relationship with the person before their family member that was more involved with them passed away. Usually is what happens. They're well meaning and I think they do what they can, but they often aren't living very close at hand. So that doesn't always include getting here.

Shirley Pickens ([01:07:39](#)):

I don't think that means they don't care about their person who lives here because I do ... Social workers contact them more, but from time to time even I have to contact people and I can tell you they always, typically there's really a genuine interest and a genuine caring about what happens to the person. And they'll say, "I don't see them much. I don't know them that well. But boy, they were important to my dad." Or, "Boy, my grandmother thought the world of them." So they're important from that aspect.

Tina Calabro ([01:08:17](#)):

You've spoken about the psychology area and how that is an active area here. What about the spiritual dimension of people's lives? Can you talk about that, how you support that?

Shirley Pickens ([01:08:29](#)):

We have a very active... The number changes from time to time. I believe we have 12 different clergy here right now. None of them are full-time. They're all contract. They are a very vibrant part of the center. They provide much more than just services on Sundays. They serve, they do that, they provide some services throughout the week, but they really look for ways to connect with the people that live here. Not too long ago we hired a young man who, I believe, he's out of the Erie diocese. He had worked with troubled youth. One of his big things is basketball. He has been working with some of our younger people here and really connecting very well with them.

Shirley Pickens ([01:09:29](#)):

I've known some of the other clergies to do activities like making blankets, tying blankets off as part of their outreach to people. And while they're doing that, they do a little talking. I wouldn't say it's a sermon, but kind of helping people move towards their religious goals.

Another really nice thing that the clergy do is when someone passes away, we want to make sure that their life is celebrated. A lot of times the family already has prepared to have a burial and a funeral service in the community. We get as many people as we can to that, but we can't always get everybody. So we always also have a memorial service here for the person, and they do a wonderful job in talking to people about that change of what happens and remembering people and celebrating their lives. It's actually really wonderful to see.

Tina Calabro ([01:11:38](#)):

Right now, Pennsylvania's grappling with the prospect of closing Polk, and it's been a very difficult time all around the state and it's not clear how that's going to turn out. What would you like people to know about Polk at this difficult time and what it has meant to you to be here for 38 years?

Shirley Pickens ([01:12:04](#)):

You're right, this is a very difficult time. I have always thought that people should live where they want to live and people should live in whatever community they want to be in. That's my personal feelings. What I want people to know is that I truly have been incredibly proud of the staff that works here. And although they have, I think, outside of here a couple of times gone a little bit off the rails and done some things that they're not even proud of [in regard to the proposed closure], I can tell you that while they are at work, I am so proud of the way they've behaved. They have focused on their jobs and focused on the people who live here.

Shirley Pickens ([01:12:59](#)):

Again, I've said it before. You can't go wrong if you're focusing on the people that live here, and they've really done a nice job at that. They've done it. It is hard. It is very hard. They are obviously worried about their own jobs. That's not the thing you hear the most though. Mostly you hear them worried about the people they support here. So they're in pain. A lot of the people who live here are upset by this concept [of closure] and in pain because to many of them the change will be more real to them as it happens. Right now it's a concept they're not completely grasping. But the people that have completely grasped it, a lot of them are upset and a lot of the families are very upset. Personally it's been very hard. It's very hard for me to see that many people in pain all the time. But I, again, I'm so proud with how they've behaved.

Tina Calabro ([01:14:10](#)):

What has working here meant to you over these years?

Shirley Pickens ([01:14:13](#)):

That's really hard to answer. I think I've been incredibly lucky. I think it's an experience that I have a million stories that I think back on and laugh about and I've been doing more of that lately. I think it's been an honor to be the director. That honor truly of leading Polk Center has hit me most when I've been sitting at memorial services and I look around and I see the people and I see the staff doing really good things and helping them. I think the weight of the responsibility of making sure that their lives are what they want them to be and are as good as they can be. Look, we're a large facility. I know our weaknesses, I know our challenges. So my goal has always been, we do the best we can, and we do.