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WORK AND LIFE

Here's how the past shaped the future — and many lives

There was once an outfit called Baltimore's Home for the Incurables, founded in 1883. Remarkably, it is still in business today.

The organization is now called Keswick Multi-Care Center. Libby Bowerman, CEO, gave me the history recently. It concerned a group of women who did something radical for their time: Not only did they found a business, which women were not empowered to do, they launched an industry by opening the world's first home for the chronically ill.

Libby spoke of these women fondly, as though they were dear friends. "I feel I'm carrying on their work," she said. "That feels incredibly worthwhile to me — more than a job."

Another influential force in shaping her life's work was her grandmother.

"She was a special lady, a deeply caring person, never very well, with a heart condition," Libby said. "She was a soft spoken individual, but firm."

I had a sense that Libby was describing her own leadership attributes, as well. But despite her strengths, there was something threatening Libby's ability to carry on the mission of the strong women behind her.

"Here in Maryland," she said, "it has become increasingly difficult for us to get people approved for Medicaid in any reasonable amount of time. For as long as six months, we receive no payment for caring for someone."

"What will happen to people if they can't get approved?" I asked.

"Knowing that a person has no place else to go, they will be here," she said.

"They will eventually be approved by Medicaid and we will be paid in arrears."

Libby admitted that this created a cash flow issue for long-term care that



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would only get more dire as the state struggled to close its huge financial gap.

Once again I was back in the halls, walking past active people in the cafeteria, in classes, hanging out, getting their hair done. Men and women were laughing, talking and flirting. It was like a college dorm.

"We do provide very sophisticated, high-level health care here, with a full-time medical director and a clinical staff that is very experienced and highly proficient," Libby said. "But we also have birthday bashes, cocktail parties, events, concerts, movies and chaplain services."

Meeting smile after smile, I reflected on how much my perception had shifted. I expected to meet incurables, people who were dying.