



CALIFORNIA

Louis Ziskind, 98; started hospital to treat mental illness

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Louis Ziskind, a social worker whose concerns about the treatment of mentally ill patients in the 1950s led him to found an innovative mental-health facility in Los Angeles, died March 9 of natural causes in Los Angeles, his son, Gregg, said. He was 98.

“He was ahead of his time in trying to help mentally ill people in a community setting,” said Mara Pelsman, chief executive of Gateways Hospital and Mental Health Center.

When Ziskind founded Gateways in 1953, mental illness was still a taboo topic; those who suffered from it were shunned. The approach of Gateways in treating the mentally ill offered a sharp contrast to that of state hospitals.

A stay in a state institution was an extremely long and isolating experience. Ziskind envisioned mentally ill patients being treated in their own communities at “community mental health care” centers. Patients would be hospitalized for a short time, their illnesses treated with new drug therapies and short-term psychotherapy.

The patients and their families would receive support in transitioning back to their normal lives. They would continue to receive outpatient psychiatric care. Gateways was founded on that vision.

“The state hospitals were large institutions; it wasn’t as personalized,” said Frances Feldman, a professor emerita of social work at USC. “Gateways was a small institution.

There was more freedom for treatment and meeting the needs of the individual and their families.”

Born May 3, 1908, in Baltimore, Ziskind was the third son of Lithuanian immigrants who had come to the United States fleeing anti-Jewish persecution. In 1923, family members began migrating to Los Angeles following the suggestions of doctors who said Ziskind’s frail health would benefit from a milder climate.

In 1926, Ziskind was a member of Belmont High School’s first graduating class. At USC, where he studied on an athletic scholarship, Ziskind earned a bachelor’s degree in education in 1931 and a master’s in social work in 1939. In 1931 he married Edith Bernstein. The couple would have two children. After his wife died in 1988, Ziskind married Dorothy Tyre Temkin, who died in 2002.

Ziskind’s push for a new way of treating mental patients was fueled by conversations with his brother, Dr. Eugene Ziskind, and his sister-in-law, Dr. Esther Somerfeld-Ziskind, both psychiatrists in private practice, and many years of practical experience as a social worker assisting the mentally ill.

In 1939 Ziskind joined the staff of the Jewish Committee for Personal Service, which was created in 1921 to provide treatment and rehabilitation for Jewish inmates in penal and mental institutions.

In that era, mental illness “had much the same status as drug addiction today,” Ziskind wrote in his 2005 book, “A History of the Jewish Committee for Personal Service & Gateways Hospital and Community Mental Health Center: A Memoir of My Life in Social Work.”

Most of the mentally ill who could not pay for private care were treated at large state hospitals, often ordered there by the court system. Patients sometimes remained in the

facilities longer than necessary because they or their families lacked the resources and support services to return them to the community.

Based in a downtown office on Temple Street, staff of the Jewish Committee for Personal Service would survey the rolls of penal institutions -- such as Los Angeles County Jail -- and state hospitals, looking for Jewish last names. They provided social services, including help with the transition from hospital to the patients' home communities.

They also prepared families for the return of their mentally ill relatives and sometimes supervised trial leaves from the hospital to determine if a patient was ready for life outside the institution. Agency staff helped secure housing and, when a trial leave was unsuccessful, helped the patient return to care.

“I have very vivid memories of hunting down in the early hours of one morning a patient who was running around outside, unclothed, disoriented and frightening people in the neighborhood,” Ziskind wrote. “I was able to talk him into entering my car for a ride back to the hospital. This was both difficult and dangerous.”

Ziskind promoted the idea of shorter stays in state hospitals, and proposed community mental health centers that would provide treatment while aiding patients in their transition back into the mainstream. His suggestions to the staff of state hospitals were rejected as too costly or unsuitable for state hospital care.

“But mostly I was made to feel that I was stepping outside of my areas of competence,” Ziskind wrote. “Who was I to tell them about definitive treatments, about what their patients needed? And from what school of medicine did I graduate?”

Ziskind set out to create a facility, though he “didn’t have two nickels to rub together.” He had the support of some, including the influential Rabbi Edgar Magnin. But

convincing others in the organization that funded the Jewish Committee for Personal Service took many years.

In 1953, the agency opened Gateways Hospital, a 10-bed pilot project built on Hoover Street near Temple Street. Ziskind's brother, who was head of the psychiatry clinic of what is now Cedars-Sinai Medical Center, served as interim director of Gateways. Other staff from Cedars-Sinai volunteered to serve patients for one year.

Ziskind "catalyzed the participation of many talented individuals on both professional and volunteer bases to build out his vision," said Ziskind's son, Gregg. Ziskind also is survived by his daughter, Trudi Ziskind; and stepchildren Norma Green and Farol Brifman.

In following years, Gateways opened its doors to non-Jewish patients. In October 1961 Eleanor Roosevelt, the widow of former President Franklin D. Roosevelt, dedicated a new hospital building in Echo Park.

"He never cared about money; he was a complete giver," Gregg Ziskind said. "Most of us as boys want to be Superman or Batman.... He wanted to be 'super social worker.' He just wanted to help everybody."

A private memorial service will be held Sunday.

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