Hansen's center marks 100th year with memories

By CHRIS FRINK
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W.L. Daigle offered a glimpse Wednesday of his early days in the Hansen's disease center at Carville. "Any resemblance of this place to a hospital was purely coincidental...it was more like a prison," he said.

"When I arrived at Carville (55 years ago)...I hit a bottomless pit." Daigle and current and former patients, along with doctors, public health administrators and others, spoke to several hundred people at a ceremony to mark the 100th anniversary of the Willis W. Long Hansen's Disease Center.

The hospital is named in honor of Louisiana's late 8th District congressman and two-time candidate for governor who successfully led a fight to continue federal funding of the facility.

The original Louisiana Leper Home came into existence in 1894 when seven patients were plucked from a New Orleans "pest house," put on a coal barge, and brought upriver to an abandoned plantation.

The U.S. Public Health Service took over the complex in 1912.

The almost two-dozen speeches during Wednesday's ceremony varied in style and content. Many drew laughter from the audience, some tears. Most were personal, some official.

Few of the talks were short, several ran long, but all focused on past advances and hopes for future developments in treatment of the disease once called leprosy.

Daigle also remembered Stanley Stein, a patient from Texas who worked and wrote tirelessly to eliminate the centuries-old stigma linked to the disease.

Stein for many years edited The Star, a patient-produced magazine about Hansen's disease that circulates internationally.

Betty Martin, 86, a patient who wrote her best-selling autobiography, "Miracle at Carville" in the 1950s marveled at the crowd that overflowed the auditorium.

"This is beyond my dreams," she said several times.

Martin also thought back to when she and her future husband first arrived at Carville and how it changed their lives.

"Jan. 15, 1927 - you never forget that day," she said. "The first thing we did was change our name to protect our families."

Current center director Robert Jacobson reviewed some of the many medical advances made at Carville.

A Carville doctor discovered the first known cure for the disease in 1941 when he began using sulfones, drugs, a successful tuberculosis treatment, on leprosy patients.

Sulfones remain the only known cure and the center continues to research sulfonamide treatments and search for a Hansen's disease vaccine.

"It's one of the greatest success stories of our time," he said.

The World Health Organization estimates about 2.4 million people worldwide have the disease and Carville remains the center of Hansen's research, Jacobson said.

"Carville is better known in many countries than other major U.S. medical facilities," Jacobson said.

Patient Johnny Harmon, who came to Carville in 1955, remembered the experimental treatments in the years before sulfones.

"Someone decided the bark from willow trees was the answer," he said.

"Lots of trees lost their bark, but Hansen's disease wasn't hurt," James Carville, the national political consultant and community of Carville native, gave the keynote address.

With his suit coat off, sleeves rolled up and looking out over the top of his reading glasses, Carville extolled patients' accomplishments.

"At this place we have witnessed the triumph of the human spirit," he said.

"When people say we have no heroes, tell them to come to Carville. This stage is full of them. This theater is full of them. This center is full of them."

The days of patients being forced to come to the hospital, sometimes in handcuffs, are over, but the unfounded stigma remains in some places, Carville said.

He told the story of a man diagnosed in Florida six months ago. The patient was put in isolation and shunned by medical professionals, Carville said.

"Nurses treated him as if he was a common criminal," he said. "We have to be reminded that these ancient battles still must be fought."