

Staff photographer's exhibit opens in McDermott



This photo of the asylum conveys "the emptiness of forgotten souls" to UTD staff photographer Rick Biddenstadt.

On a quiet bluff overlooking a bend in the Illinois River in central Illinois stands a complex of 57 lonely, deteriorating buildings once known as the Illinois Asylum for the Criminally Insane. This institution, later renamed the Peoria State Hospital, opened its doors in 1902 and served some 3,000 patients before being closed by the state of Illinois in 1973.

UTD's Media Services staff photographer, Rick Biddenstadt, discovered the abandoned hospital by accident while on an unrelated assignment for his then-employer, Bradley University in Peoria. The

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This interior shot shows what is thought to be a playroom for children in the Illinois Asylum for the Criminally Insane.

Photo essay exhibited

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incongruously tranquil, idyllic setting of the place made such a striking impression on him that he decided to make it the subject of a photo essay.

During the research for this project Biddenstadt learned of the tragic brutality that had taken place within the walls of this institution, eventually known as "The Campus." He discovered such horrors as straight jackets and lobotomies, as well as case histories of people erroneously hospitalized for physiological conditions like epilepsy, tuberculosis and low intelligence.

Biddenstadt's photo essay is entitled "The Campus" and consists of 15 black and white photographs of interiors and exteriors of random buildings

on the asylum grounds. Admitting that he has a preference for photographing "old, empty buildings with lots of space," Biddenstadt has an additional purpose in mind with this exhibition. "I want," he says, "to convey through these photographs, the loneliness, the emptiness of forgotten souls, the anguish of tormented minds and the pain of empty lives—imprisoned in time within empty shells of cracked mortar, broken glass and worn brick."

"The Campus" will be on display March 4-31 in the Special Collections area on the third floor of UTD's McDermott Library, open to the public free from 9 a.m.-6 p.m. Monday-Thursday and 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Fridays.