

Rosemary Kennedy: How One Tragic Story  
Changed the Fate of the Disabled Community Forever

McKinney Writing Contest:  
Essay/Creative Non-Fiction  
Hannah L. Price '23

Throughout history, individuals living with various types of mental or physical disabilities have been marginalized and persecuted. Nevertheless, the public perception and treatment of people possessing impairments or attributes outside of the norm has been transformed over time; this amelioration was achieved through a series of initiatives introduced over the past fifty years by motivated individuals dedicated to the cause of improving the quality of life for people living with disabilities. After centuries of suppression, ignorance, and mistreatment of people living with mental and physical disabilities in the United States, one tragic woman's story altered the path of history for people with disabilities forever by inspiring powerful people to fight for change. Her name was Rosemary Kennedy, daughter of Joseph P. Kennedy Sr. and Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy, and a sister of future President, John F. Kennedy. Despite being born to one of the most influential families in America, Rosemary was not sheltered from persecution for being intellectually disabled. Rosemary was considered a burden to the Kennedy name, and as a result of this and in response to ill-conceived ideas about the nature of her mental disability, she was institutionalized, hidden from the public eye throughout her childhood, and ultimately forced to undergo an egregious surgery that left her incapacitated at the young age of 23. The once lively eldest daughter of the Kennedy dynasty tragically disappeared, but her story and her legacy will live on forever. In response to the misery Rosemary endured, her siblings carried on her legacy by becoming activists for the disabled community and by dedicating their lives to better the world. Furthermore, the perception and treatment of those living with intellectual and physical disabilities was revolutionized because of Rosemary Kennedy's story.

Public perception of the mentally and physically disabled was initially rooted in longstanding social constructs. One fundamental organization that provided social precepts that influenced the treatment of disability and exceptionality in society was the church. Since the Middle Ages, Catholic and other Christian churches have had a profound influence on Western culture. Americans often revere the many contributions of religion to our culture; however, at times, religious ideology came into conflict with medical concepts not yet thoroughly understood by science. One of the greatest examples of misconception is that of disabilities, for many believed mental or physical impairments or differences were the result of the corruption of Satan. As a result, people with these impairments were regarded by some as soulless, and thought to have been inflicted with their disabilities simply as a punishment for sin by God.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to religion, there was a dangerous new ethical philosophy known as eugenics that was sweeping across America, gaining support in the late 1930's, which influenced the public's perception of people with disabilities. This ideology was presented as a moral philosophy to "improve humanity by encouraging the ablest and healthiest people to have more children,"<sup>2</sup>. Nevertheless, the eugenics movement tainted science with stereotypes and stigma, encouraging the facilitation of sterilization and the institutionalization of the disabled. In theory, sterilization was meant to protect the public from inheriting these impairments by altering the nation's gene pool, but in reality, it further developed a dangerously callous concept that to be mentally or physically different was to be broken and without value. Institutionalization additionally removed them from the public eye - on the surface, providing those with special

---

<sup>1</sup> McNamara, Eileen. *Eunice: The Kennedy Who Changed the World*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Carlson, Elof. "Scientific Origins of Eugenics." *Scientific Origins of Eugenics*.

needs appropriate and medically necessary care, but in actuality creating a flawed system that mistreated and abused those in its care. The philosophy embodied by the eugenics movement pervaded medicine and the law, as an increasing number of states began to pass laws to sterilize persons deemed “mentally deficient”<sup>3</sup>.

One of the most famous cases involving the government's right to sterilize people considered retarded or impaired, was the Supreme Court case *Buck vs. Bell* in 1927. This case involved a young woman named Carrie Buck, who was labeled “feebleminded” by the state of Virginia on January 23 of 1924. Earlier that year, Virginia had created passed the “Sterilization Act of 1924” stating:

1. Be it enacted by the general assembly of Virginia, That whenever the superintendent of the Western State Hospital, or of the Eastern State Hospital, or of the Southwestern State Hospital, or of the Central State Hospital, or the State Colony for Epileptics and Feeble-Minded, shall be of opinion that it is for the best interests of the patients and of society that any inmate of the institution under his care should be sexually sterilized, such superintendent is hereby authorized to perform, or cause to be performed by some capable physicians or surgeon, the operation of sterilization on any such patient confined in such institution afflicted with hereditary forms of insanity that are recurrent, idiocy, imbecility, feeble-mindedness or epilepsy; provided that such superintendent shall have first complied with the requirements of this act.“<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> McNamara, Eileen. *Eunice: The Kennedy Who Changed the World*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018.

<sup>4</sup> Virginia Sterilization Act of 3/20/1924, S. 281 (1924).

Nine months after Carrie was evaluated , Superintendent A.S. Priddy, the superintendent of the Virginia institution, requested that Carrie have a sterilization operation known as a salpingectomy.<sup>5</sup> Carrie along with her attorney argued that the constitution protected the right of American citizens to procreate, regardless of being labeled “retarded”. After the case eventually rose to the Supreme Court, it was ruled that no rights were being violated, and the highest court thus upheld the Virginia Sterilization Act. This ruling displays America’s pattern of disregard for the rights of individuals suffering mental or physical disability. Moreover, through the incidental concurrence of these two societal ideologies, eugenics and religion, misconceptions were both upheld and reinforced, thus hindering the care of those suffering disabilities and preventing them from exercising their Constitutional rights and freedoms.

Rosemary Kennedy was born on September 18, 1918 in Brookline Massachusetts as the third child for the Kennedy family, but also their first girl. Rosemary’s birth was far from easy, the Kennedy’s obstetrician was late, as he was detained with other sick patients, and thus had not arrived once the baby began to enter the birth canal. The nurse urged Rose, Rosemary’s mother, to suffer and endure each contraction, encouraging her not to push and to wait for the doctor. Modern medicine has established that preventing a baby from naturally moving through the birth canal can cause a lack of oxygen to the child, thus endangering the baby by causing physical disability or brain damage.<sup>6</sup> Yet, the nurse, unaware of these consequences, proceeded to order

---

<sup>5</sup> "Sterilization, Involuntary." In *Violence in America*, edited by Ronald Gottesman and Richard Maxwell Brown. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1999. *U.S. History In Context*

<sup>6</sup> Larson, Kate Clifford. *Rosemary: The Hidden Kennedy Daughter*. Boston ; New York: Mariner Books, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016.

Rose Kennedy to hold her legs together as tight as she could in order to delay the birth and wait for the obstetrician. Nonetheless, as this action did not seem to delay the birth, the nurse then gripped Rosemary's head and forced it back into her mother's birth canal for another two hours.<sup>7</sup> Hence, the manner in which Rosemary was born, deprived of oxygen, very likely caused damage to her brain that can be potentially linked to her suspected intellectual disability. Even, in the first day of her life, Rosemary's fate was in some manner influenced by powerful and flawed understandings about human biology and human development.

As Rosemary Kennedy grew up, her parents began noticing differences between Rosemary's development in comparison to her brothers, and they struggled to come to terms with the best way to address her needs. Unfortunately, her destiny continued to be shaped by misconceptions about the nature of mental disability. There were delays for Rosemary in relation to the typical developmental milestones of a regular child; Rosemary took longer to learn, crawl, stand, walk, and talk. As Rosemary got older, her younger sisters even began to surpass her developmentally. Rosemary began to struggle in school, and by the end of her kindergarden year, her teachers Beau and Cordelia Gould denied Rosemary promotion to first grade.<sup>8</sup> It was at this time that Rose began reaching out to specialists to learn how to cope with Rosemary's intellectual shortcomings. Multiple psychologists and various doctors all seemed to draw the same conclusion: Rosemary was simply retarded. As the Kennedy's wealth grew, so did their number of children, and Rosemary continued to fall behind. She struggled to master English and math skills suitable for children even younger than her. Rosemary often wrote from right to left

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

as opposed to left to right, and she struggled spelling and writing among other subjects.<sup>9</sup> Her school did not provide sufficient resources, nor support, and thus Rosemary's parents pulled her out of school to be homeschooled instead. Rose hired a plethora of staff and teachers in an attempt to have Rosemary catch up to other girls her own age. However, as time passed, the gap between Rosemary's academic abilities and that of other girls her own age widened and thus Rose and Joe Kennedy sought to find an institution to care for Rosemary.

Institutions for the mentally disabled and the mentally ill were poorly suited to meet the needs of the people they were supposed to serve. These facilities were primarily created to hide the disabled and were not well-equipped to support them to achieve their full human potential. Furthermore, the quality of these institutions varied and where a person was placed depended on the wealth of that individual's family. There were two general classifications of institutions: public and private. Wealthy families could afford the care of private institutions, but for many individuals suffering disability in America, public institutions were their only option. Many of these facilities were gruesome and inhumane; some institutions have even been described as "houses of horror" and "purgatory".<sup>10</sup> Dorothea Dix, an advocate for asylum reform, stood before the legislature of Massachusetts and spoke about her time traveling around to different institutions, observing the horrors of prejudice firsthand: "I proceed, Gentlemen, briefly to call your attention to the present state of Insane Persons confined within this Commonwealth, *in cages, closets, cellars, stalls, pens! Chained, naked, beaten with rods, and lashed into obedience!*"<sup>11</sup> Many institutionalized disabled persons were seen as animals, their treatment

---

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Larson, Kate Clifford. *Rosemary: The Hidden Kennedy Daughter*. Boston ; New York: Mariner Books, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016.

<sup>11</sup> Dix D. "*I Tell What I Have Seen*". The Reports of Asylum Reformer Dorothea

being so atrocious due to centuries of stigmatization. The eugenics movement, today understood as pseudoscience, was, at that time, perceived by the public as an exciting, new, and innovative science. This ideology influenced the perceptions of Americans encouraging them to disregard people who were outside the norm making it easy to label them as “defective”. As a result, it was commonly believed by the American public that there shouldn’t be funding for disabled people and that support of charitable efforts assisting institutions such as asylums and poorhouses would be supporting the procreation of the disabled community.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, lack of funding was evident, as many institutions failed to provide even the bare minimum for their patients. An attendant from a New Jersey state hospital one described, “I have seen coleslaw salad thrown loose on the table, and the patients expected to grab it as animals would... Tables, chairs, and floors are many times covered with the refuse of the previous meal.”<sup>13</sup> Starvation amongst these institutions was common, and overcrowding was ordinary. In addition to inadequate funding and dwindling public support, there were no formal government regulations in place to regulate the care provided by these institutions and ensure that even the most moderate standards of health and safety were met. No background checks were required, unskilled workers were often hired to fill positions, and caretakers were paid little therefore perpetually reinforcing the idea that their work wasn’t important. Moreover, the failure to create a safe environment for people with disabilities where they could flourish reveals how society believed that they were not worthy of respect and that they had no rights nor claims to human dignity.

---

Dix. *American Journal of Public Health*. 2006;96(4):622-624.

<sup>12</sup> Larson, Kate Clifford. *Rosemary: The Hidden Kennedy Daughter*. Boston ; New York: Mariner Books, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016.

<sup>13</sup> Koehler-Pentacoff, Elizabeth. *The Missing Kennedy: Rosemary Kennedy and the Secret Bonds of Four Women*. Baltimore: Bancroft Press, 2016.

Joe Sr. and Rose both struggled to raise a child who was less than superior, they were not equipped to handle a “retarded” child who did not meet their standards or uphold the merit attributed to carrying the Kennedy name. As Rosemary grew up, the couple found it increasingly difficult to come to terms with her disability. Consequently, once she turned the age of eleven, Joe and Rose knew that it was time to send her away to a special boarding school. In the 1920’s, because of the stigmatization around mental illness and mental disability, the entire Kennedy family could be subject to shame and disgrace should they admit that Rosemary was “feble-minded” or “retarded”.<sup>14</sup> As a means to both help Rosemary to develop and to avoid being ostracized by the public, Rose and Joe had to make one of the most difficult decisions a parent can make: the choice to send their child away. At age eleven, Rosemary was sent to the Devereux School in Pennsylvania, the first of five boarding schools that Rosemary would eventually attend in her lifetime. Unfortunately, due to her personality and perhaps as a consequence of her condition, Rosemary wasn’t easily accustomed to change, and these transitions proved to be difficult for her throughout her life which served to further escalate her problems rather than heal them.

The relationship between Rosemary and her father was quite peculiar; Rosemary tried her best to live up to her father’s expectations, but he would often get frustrated with her because he was unable to understand and foster her intellectual development in a positive and appropriate way. According to Eunice, one of Rosemary’s younger sisters, Joe Sr. was “easily upset by Rosemary’s lack of progress, {and} her inabilities to use opportunities for self-development.”<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> The Joseph P. Kennedy Jr. Foundation for the Benefit of Persons with Intellectual Disabilities. Eunice Kennedy Shriver." Special Olympics. Accessed May 3, 2018.

Joe Kennedy Sr. naturally had high expectations for his children, as he was a thriving businessman who was flourishing-- his name becoming widely known throughout the United States. Gradually, the Kennedys became a family dynasty in America, and Joe and Rose as a result held their children to the highest standards. Rosemary constantly sought validation from her father. On October 15, 1934 Rosemary wrote Joe Kennedy: "Dear Daddy... Thank you so much for coming down to see me...I would do anything to make you so happy. I hate to disappoint you in any way. Come see me very soon. I get very lonesome every day."<sup>16</sup> Although Rosemary aspired to be the perfect daughter, she was never able to attain the image of what her father wanted her to be. Nonetheless, her words serve as a reminder of the complex emotional struggles of a young person growing up with a disability that is not understood by the people he/she loves.

As Rosemary grew older, new problems began to arise as her behavior became more erratic and unpredictable. After Rosemary aged out of school, her parents struggled to find a suitable facility for her and eventually decided that sending her to a convent would be the best option for her own security as well as security for the Kennedy family name. Although Rosemary was twenty years old, she wasn't even allowed outside by herself. She felt trapped. Consequently, Rosemary would often sneak away at night to bars, and was rumored to even sleep with men she met. According to Rose's niece, Anne Gargan, the convent would "call to say she was missing only to find her walking around the streets at 2:00 a.m.... Can you imagine what it must have been like to know your daughter was walking the streets in the darkness of the night, the perfect prey....?"<sup>17</sup> Joe Kennedy Sr. was fearful that Rosemary's behaviors would draw

---

<sup>16</sup> letter

<sup>17</sup> Larson, Kate Clifford. *Rosemary: The Hidden Kennedy Daughter*. Boston ; New York:

negative attention to the family. There was an unspoken rule for the Kennedy children to “keep out of the newspaper columns”.<sup>18</sup> Seeing that Rosemary habitually snuck out to bars, Joe Kennedy was petrified of a pregnancy scandal or of Rosemary getting kidnapped.

In addition to the fear of scandal, the Kennedy’s struggled to understand and cope with some of the more severe behavioral issues exhibited by Rosemary. They came to believe that “a neurological disturbance had overtaken her, and it was becoming progressively worse.”<sup>19</sup> Rosemary would have tantrums full of rage at unsuspecting moments, frequently and unpredictably. The combination of Rosemary’s new erratic behavior combined with her habit of sneaking out at night made tensions rise for the Kennedy family. Joe and Rose knew that something had to change. They began desperately seeking out relief. Joe Kennedy Sr. believed that Rosemary was a danger to the Kennedy name and to all of Rosemary’s siblings aspirations. According to Family nurse Luella Hennessary, “Mr. Kennedy was so afraid of Rosemary’s getting into trouble or of her being kidnapped. It would be better for her not to be exposed to the general public in case she ran away... It would be better to almost close the case...Then there wouldn’t be any more trouble.”<sup>20</sup> Joe Kennedy Sr. was looking for a permanent solution. After hearing praise of a new experimental psychosurgery that was said to relieve mentally ill and disabled patients, Rosemary’s father was eager to look into the operation. Like many before him, his understanding of Rosemary’s condition was corrupted by misconceptions about mental

---

Mariner Books, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Koehler-Pentacoff, Elizabeth. *The Missing Kennedy: Rosemary Kennedy and the Secret Bonds of Four Women*. Baltimore: Bancroft Press, 2016.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

disability and grounded in his faith in “cutting edge” remedies that were not well-conceived and based in a very incomplete understanding of the human brain.

During the early 1900’s hundreds spanning to the mid 1900’s, much was unknown about the brain and the functions of each component. There were also many misconceptions between the difference of mental disability and mental illness. Many times, broad generalizations and interpretations lead to vague diagnoses. According to psychological definitions during Rosemary’s time, “idiots” was a term used for the most disabled patients (usually having brain function of a two year old or younger), “imbeciles” were used for moderate disability (three to eight year old brain function), and finally “morons” were those who had the lesser degree of disability (eight to twelve year old brain function). Because the knowledge around mental illness and mental disability was sparse at this time, families with children living with these impairments were desperate for a cure, for hope. Doctors prescribed a variety of gruesome treatments, unaware of their side effects and meager results. There were various “remedies” for brain disorders; however many seemed so dated that they harkened back to the Middle Ages. One such treatment was hydrotherapy, a practice in which patients went through rain douches or showers of water. Additionally, one of the most common treatments for mental illness was electroshock therapy, a technique where an electric current passed through a patient’s brain to produce seizures. Other procedures, also reminiscent of the Middle Ages, included removal of ovaries, tonsils, teeth, and thyroid gland in hopes to balance a patient's emotions.<sup>21</sup> All of these procedures and more were disappointments, and neglected to help the patients in any way. These were administered by doctors who were under extreme pressure and expectation to help families

---

<sup>21</sup> Koehler-Pentacoff, Elizabeth. *The Missing Kennedy: Rosemary Kennedy and the Secret Bonds of Four Women*. Baltimore: Bancroft Press, 2016.

with children suffering from mental illness and mental disability. They were supported by families who were desperate and made all the more vulnerable by deeply ingrained notions of mental disability that were themselves on some level medieval.

The “miracle” procedure that the Kennedys hoped would cure Rosemary was yet another in the long list of ineffective remedies, one with grave consequences. As with the other cases, the pressure of expectations, the distortion of facts, and the general lack of specific knowledge about the operating systems of the brain led to the acclaim of a new procedure in 1935 known as the prefrontal lobotomy. Originally the procedure was only conducted in Europe, but gradually news of this new “miracle” operation spread to the United States. Two of the biggest advocates for the procedure were Dr. Walter Freeman and Dr. James Watts, faculty from the George Washington University Medical School. The pair were widely known to the neurosurgical and psychiatric community in Washington as pioneers in many different types of innovative approaches to help cure mental disease and disability. One of their most famous experimental surgeries was indeed the lobotomy, a procedure in which involved “cutting the fibrous connective tissue linking the frontal lobes to the rest of the brain.”<sup>22</sup> It was believed that by dismembering the connecting in this part of the brain would relieve patients of violent rages and pain. The operation was praised and was painted as a revolutionary cure for many different types of mental disease and illness. A *Saturday Evening Post* article published in the spring of 1941 praised the results of the new operation, “From problems to their families and nuisances to themselves, from ineffectives and unemployables, many of the two hundred have been transformed into useful members of

---

<sup>22</sup> Larson, Kate Clifford. *Rosemary: The Hidden Kennedy Daughter*. Boston ; New York: Mariner Books, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016.

society.”<sup>23</sup> The language here accentuates the common perception of any person with a mental disability or illness as useless and without worth. Additionally this matter of fact portrayal of mental health as something to be simply fixed reveals deeply held misconceptions of the times. These misconceptions were further fostered by public perceptions and media portrayals that distorted the successes of such experimental procedures. For example, the article titled “Turning the Mind Inside Out” describes the “sensational procedure” to have amazing results, “good in 65 percent of the cases, fair in about 20 per cent, poor in about 15 per cent.”<sup>24</sup> Articles similar to this one painted a far rosier picture of the procedure than what was indeed accurate, and were filled with many different kinds of scientific inaccuracies.

In reality, many of Dr. Freeman and Dr. Watt’s patients suffered severe defects including loss of cognition and fatalities. Additionally, Freeman did not do an adequate job on keeping records, and his data was found to be slanted to make him and the surgery appear to be more effective. A porter named John White told Kick Kennedy, one of Rosemary’s younger sisters, that the results of the surgery were “just not good” and that the patients “don’t worry so much but they’re gone as a person, just gone.”<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, the editorial board of the *Journal* said that “in spite of these improvements in the mental condition of some patients this operation should not be considered as there is ample evidence of the serious defects produced.”<sup>26</sup>

Nonetheless, Dr. Watts’ and Dr. Freeman’s unwavering confidence in the procedure attracted

---

<sup>23</sup> Kaempffert, Waldemar. "Turning The Mind Inside Out." *Saturday Evening Post*, May 1941

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Koehler-Pentacoff, Elizabeth. *The Missing Kennedy: Rosemary Kennedy and the Secret Bonds of Four Women*. Baltimore: Bancroft Press, 2016.

<sup>26</sup> Larson, Kate Clifford. *Rosemary: The Hidden Kennedy Daughter*. Boston ; New York: Mariner Books, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016.

many news outlets to embrace the potential of the procedure and inspired families to produce patients to undergo the operation.

Joe Kennedy Sr. heard about the radical new surgery, and immediately scheduled an appointment to discuss if this surgery was a reasonable option for Rosemary. His misconceptions about mental health fueled his decision to forever alter the mind of his daughter. According to Rose Kennedy years later, he did not thoroughly consult her or he did not hear her reservations on Rosemary having the surgery: “Joe took matters into his own hands.”<sup>27</sup> At this time there were no laws in place empowering patients to make their own medical decisions. Rosemary Kennedy was powerless, without control of her own future. Joe Kennedy made the call for Rosemary to undergo the experimental procedure, and in November of 1941, Rosemary as her family had known her, would disappear forever.

The consequences of this procedure and the extremely brutal nature of it further exhibit the callous disregard that was shown by some within the medical community for the rights of and the emotions of those deemed by society to be mentally disabled. Rosemary’s lobotomy commenced with Dr. Freeman administering a local anesthesia to numb the area where he would place the drill. Around this time sedation was not used, and so Rosemary would have been awake throughout the disastrous operation. Her hands were tied down to the table, Rosemary was most likely very anxious and upset about what was to come. As the drill drove into her skull, she might have had the same reaction as other patients, screaming and crying out that they wanted to die. The surgeons then inserted the leucotome, an instrument specifically designed for lobotomies, and as he dove deeper into her brain, he asked her to sing songs, tell stories, or

---

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

count. By the final cut, Rosemary had become incoherent, and slowly stopped talking. Rosemary left the surgery almost entirely incapacitated. The surgery that promised Rosemary to become docile and less moody left her without the ability to walk or talk. The once eager, happy, eldest daughter of the Kennedy's was lost forever.

For the next twenty years, the horrors of Rosemary's ruthless lobotomy had little effect upon her family because she essentially disappeared from their lives. After Rosemary's lobotomy in November of 1941, it would be twenty years until her family would see her again. Joe Kennedy immediately placed her in a psychiatric care facility called Craig House, and later moved her to Saint Coletta's, a residential care facility in Wisconsin. Moreover, the following years after her surgery Rosemary seemed to have disappeared off of the map, only being mentioned a few times in letters. According to many family members, they had no idea where she was. Similarly, Rosemary's circumstances for the next twenty years did not influence public perceptions or public policy as she was essentially wiped from the public eye. There were rumors floating around that she was a teacher for disabled children in Wisconsin. On some level, everyone wanted a happy ending, but the resolution was far from happy. Although Rosemary wasn't able to adequately communicate, she was still cognitively aware of her family's desertion. Finally, in 1962 her mother would come to visit her. Then, in the years that followed, her siblings also came, each trying to reconnect with their lost sister, trying to make up for lost time. It was through this rebuilding of connections between Rosemary and her siblings that the transformative power of her loss came to life. Rosemary would never be the same person, but she was no longer forgotten, and as each of her siblings came to better understand her story, they began to take action. As a direct result of Rosemary's story, several of her family members

would begin to become disability rights advocates; they were ready to fight for Rosemary now that they had the power to do so.

The first of the family to mobilize to advocate for disabled rights were, symbolically, Joe and Rose Kennedy. The couple founded the Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr. Foundation in 1946 in honor of their oldest son who died in battle during WWII. The mission of the foundation was to research the causes of mental retardation and explore better methods of prevention and treatment, as well as to foster improvements in the ways society treats mentally retarded citizens. After lobotomizing Rosemary and then essentially leaving her in isolation from her family, arguably, the establishment of an organization with this mission is ironic. Nonetheless, the focus of this foundation demonstrates an awareness on the part of the Kennedy parents that the issues faced by their daughter were in grave need of attention. Additionally, this action suggests on at least some level a recognition of Rosemary's loss albeit indirect. They never publicly renounced their decision to lobotomize Rosemary, and it was not until Joe Kennedy suffered a stroke that the family finally went to visit her. Yet, clearly she had affected them, and that effect was profound.

Through their foundation, the Kennedys not only worked to uphold the rights of the intellectually disabled, but they also established a bioethics research library and a research center, the Kennedy Institute of Ethics in 1971. Rosemary's life clearly highlights human rights issues in medicine as they relate to the disabled. The need to address complex issues such as these that arise as medical advances challenge ethical boundaries was something recognized in the creation of the Institute. Senator Ted Kennedy articulated this in speaking about the Institute and its mission to promote public awareness and education on "urgent moral issues": "Human life is too precious and the decisions regarding it too important to leave to any one group of

specialists—doctors, lawyers, scientists, political leaders, or theologians. That is why this new Institute is bringing together men and women skilled in every discipline concerning human development—to begin to look at the issues more broadly and humanely...”<sup>28</sup>

The ripple effects of the establishment of the Kennedy Institute of Ethics are significant. Rosemary’s story may have provided the initial focus for research, but that research has since expanded to encompass questions about other complex issues related to the environment, reproductive technology, and resource scarcity. The Kennedy’s influence, and specifically the contributions of Ted Kennedy, have helped to create and shape the field of bioethics. In his opening words at hearings in 1973 of the Senate Labor and Public Welfare Committee Senator Kennedy articulated the kinds of questions that were coming to the forefront of concern in this new field of bioethics: “Scientists may stand on the threshold of being able to recreate man...Under what conditions should genetic manipulations of our population be allowed or neurological and pharmacological modification of behavior permitted? What constitutes death? Who should have access to life-saving equipment in short supply? Should society expose some to harm for the benefit of others?”<sup>29</sup> In 1974 Senator Kennedy was a key force in establishing a national commission focused on protecting the rights of human subjects in biomedical and behavioral research, a commission that was at the heart of both debate and research addressing many topics including informed consent and coercion. “The commission’s funding of that research stimulated many scholars, who had previously thought not at all about these subjects, to reflect and contribute. The major document of the commission, the Belmont Report, had a

---

<sup>28</sup> The Kennedy Institute of Ethics, Georgetown University. "Founding the Institute." The Kennedy Institute of Ethics.

<sup>29</sup>"The Kennedy Institute of Ethics at 40: History." The Kennedy Institute of Ethics. Last modified October 28, 2011.

significant impact on the intellectual shape of bioethics.”<sup>30</sup> These issues were now the issues of the nation and the issues of the world, and Kennedy was at the helm, largely due to the awareness that emerged from his family’s experiences with Rosemary.

Eunice Kennedy, one of Rosemary’s younger sisters, had a special bond with Rosemary during their childhoods and that bond led her, like her brother Ted, to advocate for societal change in honor of Rosemary. As Eunice was the middle child, the responsibility of taking care of Rosemary fell into her lap. She was the one who often played with Rosemary and the one who sat by her at dinner and cut her meals. The disappearance of her older sister was haunting for her, and Eunice dedicated her life so that no child had to experience what her sister did. In 1968, Eunice founded the Special Olympics, an international competition for mentally and physically handicapped people. Eunice believed that sports was a mechanism that could be used to unite people. She also believed that if children with disabilities were given the right opportunities, they could succeed tremendously. What started out as 1,000 athletes and 100 spectators dotting the stands has turned into a movement with over 5 million athletes across 181 countries and 50 states.<sup>31</sup> The Special Olympics has revolutionized the way in which people with special needs are perceived; rather than just looking at what their disability is, the competition reveals their true capabilities. Furthermore, the Special Olympics provides visibility for people living with disabilities creating a forum through which the general public can interact with the disabled community. As such, it has helped to change the stigma surrounding mental and physical impairments; it facilitates inclusion and empathy. Programs like the Special Olympics provide

---

<sup>30</sup> Jonson, Albert. "Ted Kennedy and Bioethics." The Hastings Center.

<sup>31</sup> Special Olympics. "Out of the Shadows: Events Leading to the Founding of Special Olympics." Special Olympics.

support and display how extraordinary people living with disabilities can truly be, helping to break down long held stereotypes. Eunice's caring and devotion to bettering the lives of people living with intellectual disabilities is evident. On March 24, 1984 Eunice Kennedy was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom for her work with children who have special needs.

Another vital character who carried out Rosemary's legacy was her younger brother John F. Kennedy who became the President of the United States on November 22, 1963. From the onset of his Presidency, Kennedy was dedicated to revolutionizing federal resources available for families with children living with disabilities. President Kennedy created the President's National Panel on Mental Retardation, a panel that interpreted and analysed data in order to determine the needs of the disabled community and address how the government could support them. A year after the panel first convened, the group had created over 100 recommendations for improving comprehensive federal care for the disabled. The panel's report recommended moving away from custodial institutions in favor of community centered agencies, established new programs to educate parents on caring for special needs children, and emphasized the importance of special education and rehabilitation.<sup>32</sup> Through its research, the panel created model programs that served as foundations for programs existing today. In his address to the nation on February 5, 1963 President Kennedy declared the government's objectives for reform: "The time has come for a bold new approach. New medical, scientific, and social tools and insights are now available... First, we must seek out the causes of mental illness and of mental retardation and eradicate them... Second, we must strengthen the underlying resources of knowledge and, above

---

<sup>32</sup> John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum. "John F. Kennedy and People with Intellectual Disabilities." John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum.

all, of skilled manpower which are necessary to mount and sustain our attack on mental disability for many years to come... Third, we must strengthen and improve the programs and facilities serving the mentally ill and the mentally retarded... This approach is designed, in large measure, to use Federal resources to stimulate State, local and private action...’’<sup>33</sup>

During his time in office, President Kennedy would make great strides for reform by creating federal legislation. On October 24, 1963, the President signed the Maternal and Child Health and Mental Retardation Planning Amendment to the Social Security Act, his first and America’s first piece of major legislation on mental disability. Under this new amendment many of the recommendations created by the President’s National Panel on Mental Retardation were incorporated. Additionally the amendment provided planning grants for states so that they could update their intellectual disabilities programs.<sup>34</sup> This amendment to the Social Security Act was a precursor for the Americans with Disabilities Act that would be enacted in 1990. Furthermore, President John F. Kennedy also enacted a second piece of legislation on October 31 of 1963 allocating funding for the construction of facilities involving the care, treatment, and prevention of mental disabilities. The legislation also increased funding for the training of teachers of handicapped and intellectually disabled children.<sup>35</sup> Celebrating this historic passing of legislation, John F. Kennedy remarked, “The mentally ill and the mentally retarded need no longer be alien to our affections or beyond the help of our communities.’’<sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>33</sup> Federal Register Division. National Archives and Records Service, Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, John F. Kennedy, 1963 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1956-), pp.126-137

<sup>34</sup> John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum. "John F. Kennedy and People with Intellectual Disabilities." John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

The world is much different for the disabled community than in the past, and as a result the perception around disabilities has also adapted. Congress gradually passed at least 116 acts and amendments that provided the much needed support for disabilities; the legislation has influenced the world to promote inclusivity between the public and the disabled community.<sup>37</sup> Additionally, the ways in which disabled people have historically been treated has changed drastically. Even the language used to describe disability has changed. Today, the word “retarded” is looked upon by educated people as an offensive and ignorant remark. Educated people in modern society reject language that labels people in a way that is degrading and dehumanizing. Instead of using dehumanizing words like “retarded”, language has evolved to encompass words that explain, identify, and communicate the specific needs of a disabled person. In the modern world education has shaped cultural awareness in such a way as to foster a public knowledge that disabilities are not the same as diseases, and that many who live with these impairments can live successful, productive lives. In the past, the disabled were not given the resources nor the respect to live up to their fullest potential, but through legislation and organizations like the Special Olympics, they are able to strive to reach new levels of accomplishment. Through the use of widespread education on intellectual disabilities, parents are able to make informed decisions on the ways in which they can best support their child’s needs. These improvements to our system have reshaped the treatment of the disabled community forever.

---

<sup>37</sup> John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum. "John F. Kennedy and People with Intellectual Disabilities." John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum.

How did this happen and what does it have to do with Rosemary Kennedy? On some level, it all comes down to empathy. There was a study conducted in 2002 by C. Daniel Batson and colleagues named: "Empathy, Attitudes, and Action: Can Feeling for a Member of a Stigmatized Group Motivate One to Help the Group?" The experiment was conducted in separate parts, but the first involved showing a group of students a video of a convicted heroin addict and dealer, and then subsequently asking them to allocate student senate funds to an agency to help drug addicts. It was found that students who were shown the video were likely to allocate more funds to support drug addicts than students who were not. The results reflect the effect empathy has on people perceiving marginalized groups. Moreover, it was found that people who have empathy for a certain group of people are more likely to feel motivated to help this stigmatized group.<sup>38</sup>

This study can help explain the psychological reasons why Rosemary's siblings might have felt inclined to speak up for the disabled community; they felt empathy. Eunice Kennedy shares this belief, as she once wrote in the *Saturday Evening Post*, "I have found it interesting to learn that some of the most outstanding accomplishments in this field have been made by persons who also have had a family member afflicted by retardation. The personal involvement often seems to bring an extra measure of dogged determination and faith."<sup>39</sup> The projects that the Kennedy family have invested in have drastically changed the world forever; the initiatives taken have spread empathy not only across America but internationally. Today, the perspective

---

<sup>38</sup> Batson, Daniel, Johee Chang, Ryan Orr, and Jennifer Rowland. "Empathy, Attitudes, and Action: Can Feeling for a Member of a Stigmatized Group Motivate One to Help the Group?" *Personality and Social Psychology*.

<sup>39</sup> Kennedy, Eunice. "Hope for Retarded Children." *Saturday Evening Post*, September 22, 1962.

surrounding disability has changed. Disabilities are no longer perceived simply as “flaws”. Rather, the focus now is on the exceptionality of these children and their capabilities in spite of physical or mental challenges. Rosemary Kennedy’s legacy lives on through legislation, organizations, and ongoing educational efforts that were inspired by her family in an effort to change the world for other children with disabilities. Rosemary Kennedy and her tragic story have had a profound influence on the disabled community. Her legacy has changed the way that society perceives people suffering disabilities and has transformed the way that society addresses their needs in ways that inspire the imagination.

## Bibliography

- Batson, Daniel, Johee Chang, Ryan Orr, and Jennifer Rowland. "Empathy, Attitudes, and Action: Can Feeling for a Member of a Stigmatized Group Motivate One to Help the Group?" *Personality and Social Psychology*.  
<http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/014616702237647#articlePermissionsContainer>.
- Carlson, Elof. "Scientific Origins of Eugenics." Scientific Origins of Eugenics.  
<http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/html/eugenics/essay2text.html>.
- Dix D. "*I Tell What I Have Seen*"—The Reports of Asylum Reformer Dorothea Dix. *American Journal of Public Health*. 2006;96(4):622-624.
- John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum. "John F. Kennedy and People with Intellectual Disabilities." John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum.
- Jonson, Albert. "Ted Kennedy and Bioethics." The Hastings Center.  
<https://www.thehastingscenter.org/ted-kennedy-and-bioethics/>.
- The Joseph P. Kennedy Jr. Foundation for the Benefit of Persons with Intellectual Disabilities. "Eunice Kennedy Shriver." Special Olympics. Accessed May 3, 2018.  
[https://www.specialolympics.org/eunice\\_kennedy\\_shriver\\_biography.aspx](https://www.specialolympics.org/eunice_kennedy_shriver_biography.aspx).
- Kaempffert, Waldemar. "Turning The Mind Inside Out." *Saturday Evening Post*, May 1941.  
<http://web.a.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=10&sid=72610951-818f-4a20-b3fc-92a1f5cfefa8%40sessionmgr4010>.
- Kennedy, Eunice. "Hope for Retarded Children." *Saturday Evening Post*, September 22, 1962.  
<http://web.a.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=6&sid=1a3e83ab-574a-4590-8ab9-deb938830b09%40sessionmgr4009>.
- The Kennedy Institute of Ethics, Georgetown University. "Founding the Institute." The Kennedy Institute of Ethics. <https://kennedyinstitute.georgetown.edu/about/founding/>.
- "The Kennedy Institute of Ethics at 40: History." The Kennedy Institute of Ethics. Last modified October 28, 2011.  
<https://kennedyinstitute.georgetown.edu/news-events/the-kennedy-institute-of-ethics-at-40-history/>.
- Koehler-Pentacoff, Elizabeth. *The Missing Kennedy: Rosemary Kennedy and the Secret Bonds of Four Women*. Baltimore: Bancroft Press, 2016.
- Krause, Fred. *President's Committee on Mental Retardation: A Historical Review 1966-1985*. Washington, D.C.: President's Committee on Mental Retardation, 1986.  
<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED278202.pdf>.

Larson, Kate Clifford. *Rosemary: The Hidden Kennedy Daughter*. Boston ; New York: Mariner Books, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016.

Lenz, Lyz. "The Secret Lobotomy of Rosemary Kennedy." *Marie Claire*. Last modified March 31, 2017.  
<https://www.marieclaire.com/celebrity/a26261/secret-lobotomy-rosemary-kennedy/>.

McNamara, Eileen. *Eunice: The Kennedy Who Changed the World*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018.

Special Olympics. "Out of the Shadows: Events Leading to the Founding of Special Olympics." Special Olympics.  
[https://www.specialolympics.org/Sections/What\\_We\\_Do/Out\\_of\\_the\\_Shadows\\_\\_Events\\_\\_Leading\\_to\\_the\\_Founding\\_of\\_Special\\_Olympics.aspx](https://www.specialolympics.org/Sections/What_We_Do/Out_of_the_Shadows__Events__Leading_to_the_Founding_of_Special_Olympics.aspx).

"Sterilization, Involuntary." In *Violence in America*, edited by Ronald Gottesman and Richard Maxwell Brown. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1999. *U.S. History In Context* (accessed July 7, 2018).  
<http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/BT2350011399/UHIC?u=pitt94721&sid=UHIC&xid=843e0f69>.

Virginia Sterilization Act of 3/20/1924, S. 281 (1924).