



Care not Cure: Insights from the Family Foster Care System in Geel, Belgium

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Location: Geel, Belgium

- In the 6th century St. Dymphna – the patron saint of people with mental illness, incest survivors, and mental health clinicians – fled to Geel to escape from marrying her father; he followed her there and decapitated her in an act of insanity for refusing to marry him.
- In 1349 the St. Dymphna Church was erected in Geel and those with mental illness across Europe would make pilgrimages to Geel to take part in 9-day novenas in the church in order to cure their illness. When the sick rooms in the churches could no longer accommodate the high volume of pilgrims, farming families in Geel hosted pilgrims in exchange for help on their farms.
- Geel is a small town with a population of about 40,000 in the Belgian province of Antwerp and has a 750-year history of family foster care originating from the pilgrimages made to honor St. Dymphna.

Social Work Project:

- Having first heard about Geel from the Invisibilia podcast “The Problem with the Solution”, I sought to learn more about how this de-institutionalized system of psychiatric care developed, how it has been sustained for 750 years, and if and how it could exist in America.
- I followed an anthropological design of interviewing social workers, psychologists, nurses, doctors, foster families, and boarders (the term used for those with mental illness) to determine their relationship to and experience with the family foster care system and Geel.
- In comparing this model of care to that in America I wanted to explore the reasons and mechanisms for such divergent approaches to, attitudes towards, and systems of mental health care.

Findings on the Family Foster Care System in Geel:

- Essential to the humanizing approach towards those with mental illness is the belief that every individual has contributions to make to society and the perspective that difference is valuable rather than pathology.
- The spirit of Geel is so embedded in the culture that the community does not see itself as exceptionally altruistic, but rather practices deep humility in taking in boarders as this is their cultural tradition.
- Structural and institutional support, established from Belgium’s welfare state, has allowed for the preservation of the family foster care system as families have the pro-social and financial means and support and therefore can continue their practice of hosting.

Skills Utilized:

- My curiosity and ability to make connections between all things provided me with many insights into how the model of health care in Geel formed based on the social and political forces throughout the history of Belgium, how it has lasted for three-quarters of a millennium, and why this system, despite efforts to replicate it in America, has not been duplicated elsewhere.
- Flexibility and adaptability were integral skills that afforded me the opportunity to engage with influential figures in Geel and visit much of the country, as I was willing to accept a range of invitations to see and participate in their lives and work.
- My drive to find meaning in and to grow from every situation gave me both personal and professional self-reflections. One of the most profound introspective insights was that my trip to Geel came to fruition and was so transformational due to my enterprising, open, and adventurous nature.

Lessons Learned:

- In valuing difference, exemplified in how the foster families saw the contributions their boarders could make as invaluable to the family unit and the functioning of the home, mental illness was treated as a gift rather than a curse.
- Having a model of government in which the population has its basic needs met, and where the model of family foster care is supported both financially and through the assistance of the hospital medical professionals, makes hosting not just a possibility but incentivized intrinsically and extrinsically.
- The culture of hosting boarders passed intergenerationally within the familial and societal spirit of Geel normalized foster families to a level in which hosting was not seen as unique or even generous, but rather as something that families in Geel do when they can. Comparing this practice to another context, as I was to that in America, makes the rarity of this system salient.

Classroom Connections:

- SW 504 – Diversity and Social Justice in Social Work: Applying the theories of hegemony and social constructionism framed my understanding of Geel within the cultural practices that become so normalized they are invisible until compared to another context and of mental illness within the construction of its value as opposed to its pathology, which occurs in an American context.
- SW 721 – Attachment Theory with Adults in Clinical Practice: Geel was my first exposure to a community-wide secure attachment and underscored the remarkably healing power of giving vulnerable people a home in which they are cared for and accepted as they are and have a safe base and safe haven to find comfort and refuge in, just as St. Dymphna did.
- SW 691 – Field Instruction: Providing therapy to female clients at my field placement – The Women’s Center of Southeastern Michigan – has built my skills in understanding people from the lens of their context, like their environment and what they have lived through, so in Geel I was connecting the felt sense of acceptance and generosity to previous lived experiences of yearning for such comfort.

Career Connections:

- The de-institutionalized model of family and community care served as a prototype of attachment on a societal level, which paralleled the clinical approach I take as a social worker in treating the therapeutic relationship as the core of healing and finding strengths in differences that are usually pathologized.
- Critical thinking is at the core of social work and discovering the critical examination that has taken place by those within the family foster care system in order to best improve it, based on emerging evidence on best practices of care, while preserving the spirit of Geel, which is rooted in life practice, highlights the necessity of constant critical questioning.
- My time in Geel served as a profound reminder of how willing others are to share their knowledge and life experiences when someone shows a keen interest and genuinely wants to engage from a place of humility and a thirst for knowledge.



Advice for Engaging in Global Social Work:

- Stay open-minded and be willing to embrace serendipity as doing so pays off when pursuing global social work since different cultural norms are practiced in regards to planning and time flexibility.
- Remain persistent in making global projects a reality, a practice that was instrumental to my project as it took nearly seven months of communication to finalize my trip plan.
- Remember that global social work is worthwhile as it places value in all people and all situations, allowing us to use every opportunity as a learning and growing experience.

Acknowledgments and Appreciations:

I would like to immensely thank my advisor, Dr. Laura Lein, for supporting me in pursuing this project, remaining flexible to the ambiguity in planning, and providing her anthropological and life wisdom to my experience and findings. I would not have had the remarkably exceptional experience in Geel if it were not for my host, guide, and inspiration, Dr. Eric de Smet, whose generosity, kindness, and magnanimous spirit are the essence of Geel. I am incredibly grateful to Lulu Miller, those who create the Invisibilia podcast, and NPR for first exposing me to Geel and for connecting me with that community. I am so appreciative to the OPZ, Hilde Daniels, Dr. Wilfried Bogaerts, the foster family, and the boarder I met at the comprehensive and insightful orientation that they provided. I would additionally like to thank all the community members I spoke to and interviewed for their vulnerability in teaching me about how the spirit of Geel is within their lives. And finally, I am beyond thankful to Katie Lopez, Kaisha Brezina, and the Office of Global Activities for providing me with the funding and support to make this far-reaching idea a reality. Because of the transformative and life-changing nature of my experience, I am forever indebted to everyone who contributed to this project.

