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GENTLE GUARDIAN OF THE MENTALLY ILL

The Story of One Missourian

In July of this year Dr. Emmett F. Hocter, superintendent of Farmington State Hospital in Missouri, retired from this post after 38 years of dedicated labors. Mr. Jack Stapleton, Jr., reporting for THE FARMINGTON PRESS, contributed the following interesting tribute to this devoted Catholic physician whose years of zealous care of the mentally ill at the Farmington institution are a source of edification to all who know him. The article is reprinted with the kind permission of the editor of THE FARMINGTON PRESS.

I'd like to tell you about this Missourian.

He's one of God's special children, part of that special and select breed of men and women who only pass through our lives on rare occasions. But when we meet them, somehow, something about them tells us that here is a man, or a woman, who is something special.

The other day I drove nearly 300 miles to help pay tribute to this man. Had it required 500 miles or 1,000 miles, I would have still made the trip. My own time didn't matter; what did matter, I figured, was the time my friend had spent in helping others. Helping Missourians.

And do you know how long that's been, how long my friend has been helping others, in a special way, with his special gifts?

The answer, dear reader, is a lifetime.

Yes, a lifetime.

My friend is Emmett Hocter, who retired last month as superintendent of Farmington State Hospital after more than 38 years in that job.

Thirty-eight years as the director of a mental hospital — do

you know what that means? Well, let me tell you, and then perhaps you'll understand why the more than four and one-half million of us who call ourselves Missourians will never be able to pay the great debt we owe this man.

At the age of 25, with the ink not even dry on his psychiatrist's diploma, young Dr. Emmett Hocter went to Nevada, Mo., where he had been employed as a staff member. He had been there only a short time when the Farmington hospital needed a superintendent, and at an age when most of us were still growing up, Emmett Hocter assumed the heavy responsibilities as director of one of Missouri's largest hospitals. He has remained in Farmington ever since, for nearly four decades, serving the state of Missouri and its citizens, helping restore the minds of thousands of troubled Missourians, devoting every ounce of energy he could command to carry out his dedicated life of service.

What makes Emmett Hocter special?

Let me tell you a story that will help to answer the question. Recently Dr. Hocter's "boss," Dr. George Ulett, who heads the

Missouri Division of Mental Diseases, was visiting in Farmington. At 2:00 a.m., who do you think got out of a warm bed to admit a patient who was arriving at the hospital for the first time?

Emmett Hocter.

When questioned by his superior as to why he had gotten out of bed, dressed and gone to admit the patient, my friend replied, "Well, I thought perhaps I could be of help."

By all that is great and holy, this truly is dedication to the final degree.

What makes Emmett Hocter so special?

Another story to answer the question. Last fall, the Farmington superintendent was selected to receive the first annual Mental Health Award, presented by the Missouri Association for Mental Health. The ceremony was to be in Columbia, and the name of the nominee was kept secret. The biggest problem facing the officers of the state association was how to get Emmett Hocter in Columbia, away from Farmington and the state hospital. It was finally decided that Dr. Hocter's boss, Dr. Ulett, should request his presence at the state meeting. It was done and Emmett Hocter went to Columbia.

After presentation of the award, and after he had expressed his gratitude, Dr. Hocter excused himself from the meeting, explaining that even though it was 10:30 o'clock on a Friday night, he must return to Farmington that very same evening in order that he could be in his office the next morning.

And so Emmett Hocter left Columbia and drove through the night in order that he could be in his office at 8 o'clock the next morning. Most Missourians were taking the day off but not Dr. Hocter. He doesn't even take Sunday off, and you can find him in his office on practically any Sunday you happen to be in Farmington.

What makes Emmett Hocter so special, you ask?

One more story. Back in the late 1930's, this devoted Missourian began worrying about the crowded conditions in his hospital and every other mental hospital in the state. He worried long and hard over the problem, with the full knowledge that a lethargic legislature and an indifferent public were not going to vote or demand additional funds to care for the thousands who were poorly fed and poorly clothed inside our state mental hospitals.

How could the problem of overcrowding be alleviated? It took an Emmett Hocter to come up with the answer. For Emmett Hocter established, in 1938, the state's first out-patient mental clinic, within the walls of Farmington State Hospital. And since that time, thousands of Missourians have passed through the clinic, receiving care and treatment without ever having to be admitted as patients in the state's substandard mental hospitals.

The clinic solution worked so well that other hospitals began copying the program, and today, virtually every mental hospital in the nation has an out-patient clinic as a part of its treatment program.

Even though he has retired as superintendent, this gentle guardian of the mental health of thousands of Missourians is still at work. There is a new superintendent today at Farmington, and he appears to be an outstanding young man. But even though there's a new superintendent, Emmett Hocter is still at the hospital, as director of the hospital's out-patient services. His offices are in the new Hocter building, a bright and new building which will only be a small physical reminder of the years of devotion and hard work given gladly by the man for whom it has been named.

The other day I drove to Farmington to attend a reception for the new superintendent and attend a program which included the presentation of a portrait of Dr. Hocter by the hospital's employees. The presentation was made by Dr. Hocter's good friend, A. E. Powers, the business manager at Farmington. When the curtains were drawn and the audience of several hundred saw the attractive picture, every man and woman in the auditorium rose to their feet and applauded. No one gave a sign for the audience to applaud, no one motioned for them to rise. The act was spontaneous, the applause and approval were deafening, and some persons had difficulty seeing the picture through the tears in their eyes.

Then Emmett Hocter rose to his feet to accept the gift from the hospital. "I don't know how to thank you," he said. Here was the man thanking his friends for a relatively-inexpensive gift — all he had given was a lifetime of service.

And then he said, "I want to thank everyone in this hospital, everyone who has worked here or who is working here now. All of you have done an excellent job in this get-well program; all of you have contributed to the record at Farmington. There are no small jobs in a mental hospital — every job is important, and you have all done your work well, treating those who come to us for help."

Emmett Hocter said a lot more, but I had difficulty hearing him because several people near me insisted on crying, clearing their throats and trying to gain their composure. I have never figured out why persons become so emotional over things like that — I don't know why they don't let me shed my tears in peace.

When Emmett Hocter was talking, I thought of this man making his rounds through the 1800-patient hospital. I thought of the time I accompanied him on his tour, and I thought of the smiles of the men and women, fighting to regain their health, when they spotted Emmett Hocter. I thought of the young mother who told this gentleman, "Doctor, I pray for you every night; I pray God will grant you many years of happiness." And then I remembered Emmett Hocter's quiet reply, "My dear, God has already granted me your wish — now let us pray that he grants me my wish, that you become well again and return to your family." I thought of the long hours, the endless years, the heartbreak and discouragement, the dedication, the

life of service to others, the selfless devotion to thousands of Missourians.

Emmett Hocter is the most humble man I have ever met. He felt he was undeserving of the First Missouri Mental Health Award, when actually he was the unanimous and universal choice of a large, state-wide organization.

His work has been his life, and continues to be. His needs are simple, and I suspect a large portion of his salary, which ironically is much smaller than Missourians pay the head football coach at the state university, finds its way back to charity and the assistance of patients.

God created very few Emmett Hocter's. Thank God, He created one. Even if there were no more, Missouri would still be blessed.

Today, Emmett Hocter is at work, just as he has been all through these years, helping to restore the minds and lives of unfortunate Missourians. He is working in the bright new Emmett Hocter building at Farmington. But when his work is finished — and that day is far away I'm sure — I know that heaven will have another bright and shiny building, clearly marked, "Emmett Hocter Building — Enter all ye who have been helped by this man."

And that building, too, will be overcrowded.