

There was a time in the 1940s that was very exciting in social work and mental health -- true, we were aware that the problems were enormous, but the times were generous and we were full of hope that we could solve them or, at least, many of them.

Herschel Alt was part of a handful of pioneers in the human services who made a special imprint upon their respective fields. He came to the Jewish Board of Guardians and he had a dream about how children could be helped. His career in this agency started at Hawthorne, which is still notable for its care and treatment of the acting-out, delinquent adolescent. He saw Hawthorne as a place that would give order and structure to disordered young lives, that would heal, restore, and help them develop into productive and fulfilling adulthood.

He was always an innovator, who talked about the "limits of treatability." He meant, of course, pushing the limits of treatability as far as possible, beyond the expectations of the professional experts, beyond the fiscal resources of the budget minded. He projected a deep professional investment in programs for the most severely disturbed children and adolescents, who moved like strangers among their age peers, children who could not make contact with the rest of the world. The



results were the Henry Ittleson Center for Child Research and the Linden Hill School. Here we work to provide an environment that will help these children build bridges to reality so that they are no longer strangers among us. The Child Development Center was also part of the Herschel Alt dream -- the place where the youngest and the most vulnerable could be seen, nurtured, and developed in a model nursery school.

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His was an exciting and sparkling mind and it was not always easy to keep up with him. No, he was not easy, but his vision and intelligence were extraordinary and in spite of the strain and tension that sometimes accompanied that race, one had to respect and appreciate his energy, drive and purpose.

Herschel never took a no for an answer when he was on the prowl for a new program. I can remember one time when he was having some doubts about a program we ran for young schizophrenic children. He told me how he pressed the psychiatrist to give him some evidence of growth in the child after his long period of treatment. With his typical expression of exasperation, he threw up his hands and exclaimed, "You know what he told me? That the child never used to be able to tie his shoes - but now he doesn't have to - he doesn't wear any shoes



anymore." The story is probably apocryphal, but he used it with me often to prod me to give evidence of change in children.

Herschel was not beyond altering reality to achieve a goal on behalf of children. For example, when the agency ran into difficulty trying to establish a children's residence in an upper middle class community, he was questioned intensively by the local zoning board as to the nature and the character of the disturbed children who would be living in their midst. Herschel had campaigned vigorously on behalf of these children with the public authorities to obtain adequate funding for their residence by describing their disabilities in most dramatic, and what might be described as florid terms. However, with the zoning board, the blandest picture of blue eyed, angelic children emerged, who were suffering from mild speech disorders. However, all in a good cause.

However irascible Herschel was, and he could be, he had the capacity to deliver staff support when it was most needed. I can remember one occasion when we had an extraordinarily serious accident at Hawthorne, when a child was attacked and seriously wounded by another child, to the point of being life-threatening, and was hanging between life and death for many hours. No blame, no



recriminations were uttered, only a warm support and hand holding, at a time when it helped to carry the staff through a crisis of self-confidence for them as well as for the children whom they were serving.

He loved his wife, Edith, very much and she supported him warmly in his work. After she passed on, the void was evident and painful. A light went out in his life. He never recovered from that loss. In these last months, he wandered back to <sup>our</sup> ~~this~~ office on 67<sup>th</sup> St. It was the most meaningful home he knew. He belonged there with his papers under his arm.

He made a mark. He showed the way.

Herschel Alt, alavah sholom. May he rest in peace.