



ELSEVIER

Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation 7 (1996) 267-268

JOURNAL OF
*Vocational
Rehabilitation*

Book review

Deadly Innocence? Robert Perske, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995, 143 pp. soft cover \$12.95

Preface

Bob Perske, ever the investigative journalist, takes the reader on an historical odyssey of the 1930s that looks too much like the events of today. The theme of this book is the injustice afforded to individuals with a disability when they are the suspects in a major crime in their community. Perske describes how vulnerable individuals can be when confronted by people who represent the legal system whose aim may be just as strong to nab any suspect as it is to get the 'right' suspect. Perske continues his fine tradition of weaving an intriguing story whose message rings clearly throughout the pages to alert us about what may be happening in our own communities.

The general highlights of this book:

- The 45 chapters of this book are mini stories themselves that, when combined together, provide the reader with the larger question — how could this have happened?
- The ancestral roots and immediate heritage of Joe Arridy, a Syrian-American, with a label of feeble-minded, provides the backdrop against which events unfold. Perske presents an anthropological description of the culture in which Joe Arridy is accused of the vicious murder of a young girl in Pueblo, Colorado.
- The documentation and painstaking research by Perske is highly evident by the insertion of several newspaper accounts and court transcripts throughout the book.

Specific areas of excellence:

'The warden wept before the lethal beans were dropped that night in the airless room, fifty faces peering against glassed screens, a clinic crowd outside the tomb.' (p.9)

- These lines are from a poem brought to the attention of Bob Perske by a friend Richard Voorhees. Thus began the odyssey to investigate the chronology of events that led to a warden's tears upon leading Joe Arridy on his path to death.
- In the chapter titled *Diversity's Dark Side*, Perske reminds the reader of a sad part of America's past absent from many history books and certainly played down in my exposure about the disability movement in the United States. Goddard and colleagues who believed in similar values espoused that people who were labeled feeble-minded were 'multiplying at twice the rate of the general population, and not until we recognize this fact, and work on this basis, will we begin to solve these social problems.' This type of propaganda articulated by esteemed professionals ushered in the eugenics scare that became the prevalent social foundation on which Joe Arridy is arrested and charged with murder.
- The frustration of Joe Arridy's father, Henry, and his efforts to find supports for his son are praiseworthy and as Perske points out 'Probably nobody in those days gave him much credit for the way he fought for his son. Today, a tenacious and energetic father like Henry could have captured the attention of many who are committed to helping the Arridys of the world.' (p.37).

- Once the trail begins, Perske unravels the miscarriage of justice that befell young Joe Arridy — coerced confessions, unsubstantiated allegations, media pressure to solve the case, and a confession by another person. His dedication to recording the facts and his painstaking investigation have given Joe Arridy a legacy — a lesson to be learned by those of us today who work on behalf of people with disabilities who find themselves on the wrong side of the law.
- Perhaps the most poignant part of this book is Perske's portrayal of the warden in the prison where Joe Arridy occupied his final days. Roy Phelix Best is depicted as a compassionate person who went well beyond the normal bounds of what a warden is expected to do on behalf of an inmate in his prison. Warden Best buys Joe a train, ensures that he is treated with dignity, and helps to intervene on his behalf in the appeals process.

Areas in which this publication can be enhanced:

- Interested readers will want to review *A Passion for Justice*, a Connecticut Public Television Emmy award winner, a part of which is about Richard Lapointe, a man in prison for a crime Perske and a circle of friends for Richard are convinced he did not commit ...
- Support the due process rights of all individuals to fair and ethical treatment when suspected of committing a crime. This is especially critical for vulnerable citizens who may have a tendency to believe everything a person in a uniform says to them whether it is true or not.
- Share your experiences with Bob Perske and let him know of situations in which individuals with disabilities are being ill treated as suspects to a crime.
- Be a member of a circle of support for an individual in your community, especially for

individuals in trouble with the law and for whom there are few allies in the community.

Common threads throughout this publication:

- Even when the odds are heavily against an individual like Joe Arridy, there are people in the community who step forward to offer support.
- Individuals who are vulnerable and who may be used and abused by unscrupulous people in the community who step forward to offer support.
- Well-meaning professionals in the field of disabilities paved the unhealthy climate for the events to unfold in Joe Arridy's life. We need to be mindful of how we practice our values as we lead the movement toward self-determined outcomes for individuals with disabilities.

Recommendations of its utility to rehabilitation professionals:

- The next time you read an account from the local newspaper about a suspect with a disability being held for questioning in a crime, look carefully at how that person's rights were upheld and note who is in that individuals corner.
- Perske's investigative journalism is an example of thorough reporting from all sides of an issue. We each need to adopt some of this approach as we confront the challenges confronting many of the individuals for whom we provide supports.
- Share this book with colleagues who work with individuals who experience incarceration or difficult relationships with representatives of the law. The fast moving accounts of this story will affect their future actions.

Ernest L. Pancsofar, Ph.D.