Reflection on Dan Barry’s “The Boys in the Bunkhouse”

Dan Barry’s “The Boys in the Bunkhouse” forces personal reflection, carrying great weight with each word upon the realization that not only is the state of Iowa at fault for these 32 men, but I myself am as well. I have been unobservant, perhaps even blind, to the individuality of people with intellectual disabilities. I have made the fault to group individuals as “them,” as Iowa has “the boys.” However, Barry’s writing style has enabled me to realize this fault, and to re-evaluate my social practices.

Barry gave each man a voice, individualizing him to the reader as each social worker strived to do. Upon reading the first name introduced, Willie Levi, only to read a second, and a third, the realization that every man was listed made
for an unappealing thought of mulling through each name. Quickly this changed as each man had his own background, his own horrifying experience and most importantly, his own personality brought to life. Barry’s book forces the reader to see each man, to appreciate him for his individuality - not merely a tragic story about government failure and a corrupt business - but the trials faced by 32 men.

These men have served as a learning experience for me and allowed for personal growth. I was as uninformed about people with disabilities as the workers at the bunkhouse, and I was as naïve about it as they were. While not as cruel as the Neubauers, my lack of knowledge has led to passive interactions with people with disabilities. My first experience growing up was at church, to “smile, be nice to that man. He has a disability.” Smiling politely, nodding as he spoke, but never remembering the words, just the hugs he would give. Now, with slight disappointment comes the realization that I know nothing about him, only that he was nice. Ultimately, I ignored him.

During my senior year of high school, I had a study hall with a boy who has autism. We were both taking physics, and sometimes he struggled. Trying to do right by him, helping him to learn and understand his homework, we would often go over lessons repeatedly. While it could be hard, the thought was that this was
the best thing I could do. But again I had faltered, because again I don’t know a thing about this boy. I wrote off this as an act of kindness, a gold star to being a good person. Although I did help him so he would be able to achieve later in his academics and life, I labeled him not as an individual, just a good deed every seventh period. I never sought to learn something about him. I never showed concern about who he was, perhaps because becoming more than acquaintances would be emotionally challenging. It was easier to remain distant. Considering the Bunkhouse, perhaps that’s why the locked doors were never followed up, why the complaints filed were ignored. It is easier to be blind and passive.

Just as the boys in the Bunkhouse were nice to everyone who showed kindness, my study hall acquaintance would say good morning to me every day, and I will always remember that. While I made personal connections to the book, my eyes were opened. I plan to not remain passive any longer, but to be active and meet my own Willie Levis, to celebrate their achievements and acknowledge their past. For this gift, I thank these 32 men.