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

The book “The Boys in the Bunkhouse” written by Dan Barry, a St. Bonaventure alumnus, shows the exploitation and neglect of a few dozen men in Iowa. The town in which these men made their home was Atalissa. It contained not much more than a mini mart, church, corner bar, and Henry’s Turkey Service processing plant, where the men worked for more than 30 years from the 1970s up to 2008.

This story revealed the horror that the men faced in their day-to-day lives in Atalissa for decades. And the true failure of the country's Labor and Human Services Departments for those with disabilities. Seeing this failure poses a
question with today's politics: How would Donald Trump handle a similar situation?

While many Americans are aware of Trump's impulsive and egotistical ways, it's hard not to wonder what his opinion on this near servitude situation would be. Donald Trump has been known to hire foreign laborers to work on his casinos for low wages, much like the "boys" were hired by Mr. Johnson to do work for subminimum wages. The difference between these situations was that the Henry's boys didn't know any different; they were mentally unaware of their situation and a way out of it. But both Trump's foreign workers and Johnson's boys were being taken advantage of by not being given equal opportunity and pay. So if Trump has no problem taking advantage of those who are aware of it, it could be assumed that he would have no problem taking advantage of those with disabilities who are not aware.

Those who have intellectual disabilities need more care and attention than any others. But this is actually the opposite of what the “boys” in Atalissa received. They worked for hours every day in a slaughterhouse, only to return to a squalid schoolhouse that they called home. As Dan Barry wrote, "Their supervisors never received specialized training; never tapped into Iowa's social
service system; never gave the men the choices in life granted by decades of advancement in disability civil rights. Increasingly neglected and abused, the men remained in heartland servitude for most of their adult lives."

These obviously neglectful and crude conditions were reported every few years, but were always swept under the rug. The Human Services Department failed these men, ultimately failing all men and women with intellectual disabilities. Those with disabilities should receive nothing less than any other person, they have just as much individual dignity and self worth. While this holds true, Trump has been found mocking those with mental and physical disabilities, showing no regard or acceptance. Aside from his verbal abuse, Trump's hotels and casinos have been sued numerous times for violating the Americans with Disabilities Act. Based on Trump's history in these situations, he has not proven to be very mindful or accepting of those with disabilities.

“The Boys in the Bunkhouse” is a reminder of the differences every individual has. Dan Barry's reports are eye-opening for problems that still exist today regarding the acceptance and protection of people with mental disabilities.

I feel Trump shows little acceptance toward those with disabilities and the extra care they need. He thinks like a man focused only on business - lower costs
and no regard toward individuals. Someone I consider a true president, George H.W. Bush, concluded after signing the Americans with Disabilities Act, "We embrace you for your abilities and for your disabilities, for our similarities and indeed for our differences." These are words that not only Trump, but every human, being could take note of.