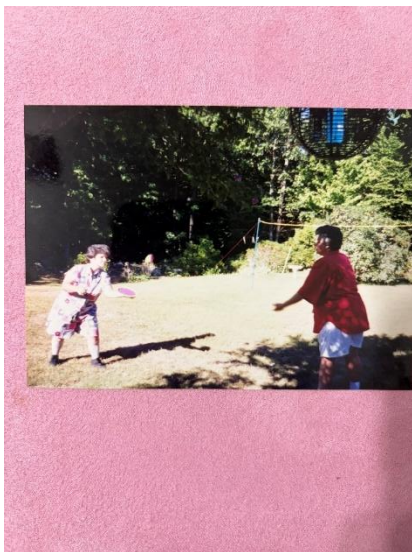




Now a days, people use the expression, B.F.F, all the time to describe a long, close friendship. For this success story I got the chance to interview two individuals with disabilities who really have been B.F.F's for over 70 years. Sandy Cusano was 10 years old and Pauline Cacioppo was 12, when they first met at Ferncliff Institution in Yonkers, NY where they lived for many years. They recalled that when they first met, they didn't really like each other but soon became friends once they got to know each other. Sandy said, "We used to fight a lot when we were younger, but then Pauline would say she was sorry and we would make up." They shared fond memories of jumping on their beds every night when they were young and trying not to get caught.



What they said deepened their bond over the years was that they understood each other and have been through a lot of good and bad times together. When I asked them what life at the institution was like, they told me it was horrible. They were both sexually and physically abused, and it was still hard for them to talk about it. They described being beaten with sticks and having their faces slammed into the floor. Sandy's father would write her letters, but the staff would rip them all up and lie to her that her father was dead. Sandy's mom gave her up when she was young and her family didn't have much involvement in her life.

Sometime between 2001-2003, a social worker found out that her parents were still alive and told her. They shared that in their past there was a lot of abuse, but things are a lot better now. When I asked them, “If you both could go back in time to give your younger selves advice, what would it be?” They responded that they would tell themselves not to let anyone hurt them, that they did nothing wrong and to make sure to tell someone that they trust if someone did hurt them.



Over the years, they made sure to keep in touch and with the help of their staff were able to visit each other. What they like most about each other is that they are both good, caring, nice people who exchange presents on each other's birthdays.



Some of the biggest moments that have happened over their 70 years of friendship were when Pauline was in her 40's, with the help of a previous staff member using Ancestry.com, discovered that she had a brother and was able to meet him. Sandy moved into an apartment, learned how to sew 34 years ago and today she lives independently and enjoys selling the items that she makes at craft shows. They both enjoy meeting new people, moving to bigger and better places and of course making new memories by spending time together.