

WAISMAN CENTER



Fig. 1. The Waisman Center, 1995. The school section is at the right. [Author Photo, AP-53]

The Waisman Center on Mental Retardation was built with federal funding in 1971. The selection of Madison for the Center was mainly through the efforts of Dr. Richard Heber, its first director. The Center is named for Dr. Harry A. Waisman, scientist and humanitarian in the field of mental retardation.

The idea for a major center for study of mental retardation at the University grew out of the studies of Dr. Harry A. Waisman, who joined the UW department of pediatrics in 1954 and serving as director of the Joseph Kennedy Memorial Laboratory for ten years. In 1964 a panel appointed by U. S. president John F. Kennedy, chaired by Dr. Richard Heber of the UW recommended that such a center be built. Waisman and Heber began to plan the center to be located at the University of Wisconsin. In 1964 informal planning began for the facility.¹

The first University official notice of the project came in 1965. Mr. Wallace Lemon and Dr. Heber presented the proposal for a mental retardation center at the November regents meeting. They said that a grant was being sought from the National Institutes of Health (NIH) to help with the costs of planning, construction and overhead. In fact, considerable progress had already been made on the project, led by Lemon and Heber. Planning grants had already been received from the federal government, and from the Joseph P. Kennedy Foundation. The key administrators had been chosen (Heber as director, Waisman as Associate director, and coordinators from the various departments involved).²

The federal government was prepared to fund twelve clinical research facilities to study the causes and treatments of mental retardation. The institutions chosen would have to match federal funds

for 25 per cent of construction costs. By March 1966 the University was notified that their proposal had been accepted and that the federal money would amount to \$4.6 million, and that the University would need to put up \$1.5 million, of which \$1.2 million was hoped to be granted by the Kennedy Foundation. NIH officials made a project site visit in June 1966.³

In March 1967, the regents asked the state building commission to approve the proposed project at an estimated cost of \$6.99 million to be funded by grants from the NIH, the U. S. Public Health Service, and state funds. The location north of the Veteran's Hospital and south of Marsh Lane was recommended; this was the far western part of the proposed medical center site. It was explained that the facility would be multi-disciplinary in nature, involving the medical school, the school of Education, and the College of Letters and Science, and be operated under the direction of the graduate school. Chancellor Fleming commended the work of Dr. Heber in setting up the project.⁴

During 1968, planning for the structure and its funding progressed. Representative Melvin Laird was instrumental in securing additional federal funding. In December 1969 the regents approved the preliminary plans for the mental retardation center which showed a one story school section adjacent to a tower section to house diagnostic and research facilities. Estimated cost was \$7 million. It was explained to the regents that this was not a hospital or treatment facility, and would have no overnight patients.⁵

The regents approved the final plans for the project on August 14, 1970. The departments involved with the project were: School of Education, the Medical School, the School of Nursing, Zoology, Psychology, Social Work, and the graduate school. During this time the building was reduced in size by about eight per cent in order to stay within the budget. It was hoped that the building could be occupied by late 1972.⁶

Bids were opened in January 1971, and construction contracts were awarded by the regents on February 4, 1971, with the general contract going to J. H. Findorff and Son for \$3.03 million. Total contracted cost was \$7.2 million. Of the total, \$2.2 million was in state funds, with the rest coming from federal grants, and some gift funds. Ground-breaking was held on March 5, 1971. Construction was "substantially complete" by February 15, 1973, and on February 16, 1973 the building was turned over to the university for use. By June 1973 the first classes were held in the building. The formal dedication and open house was held on October 7, 1973. The building is named for Harry Waisman, University scientist and humanitarian in the field of mental retardation. Dr. Waisman died in 1971, before the building was built or named.⁷

The building is in two sections, a 184 by 171 foot single story school section, connected to the eight story 135 by 123 foot research tower section. The tower section holds offices, labs, conference rooms, and a library. The school section contains classrooms, activity rooms, and a 268 seat auditorium. The entire complex is sheathed with face brick and concrete. There are now (1994) preliminary plans to add another tower section to the Waisman Center for more research space.

1) Chronology of Events: Mental Retardation Center, undated, series 24/9/2-1 box 21; Application for Construction Grant, May 26, 1965, series 40/1/7/1 box 48; Capital Times October 27, 1961;

2) Regent's Minutes, November 12, 1965; Wisconsin State Journal, November 14, 1965; Daily Cardinal, July 2, 1965; Guthrie to Heber, June 23, 1965, Memorandum, Holt to Madsen, July 26, 1965, Clodius to Jossem, November 22, 1965, series 40/1/2-1 box 14.

3) Heber to Fleming, April 28, 1966, Clodius to Fowler, May 24, 1966, series 40/1/2-1 box 14.

4) Regent's Minutes, March 10, 1967; Wisconsin State Journal, January 26, 1967.

5) Regent's Minutes, July 25, 1969, December 12, 1969; Wisconsin State Journal, June 20, 1968.

6) Regent's Minutes, April 10, 1970, August 14, 1970; Building Program and Analysis, July 27, 1970, series 24/9/2-1 box 21.

7) Bid Tab, February 2, 1971, series 24/9/2-1 box 21; regent's Minutes, February 2, 1971 Exhibit L; Heber to Edsall March 1, 1971, series 24/9/2-1 box 21; Progress Reports, June 8, 1973, series 83/35 box 4; Capital Times, June 23, 1973, October 6, 1973; Wisconsin State Journal, October 8, 1973; Archives H. A. Waisman biographical file.