

Enjoying their freedom

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Jim Dunn still gets angry when he thinks about the years he spent in institutions.

The normally gentle man shakes when he recalls staff hanging up the phone on his mother. He talks briefly about fights he witnessed, abuses he saw, and the realities of day-to-day life as a resident of the Rideau Regional Centre for people with mental disabilities.

"We had to hold hands whenever we went for a walk," he remembers. "I didn't like institutions bossing you around and telling you what to do."

His sister is convinced that Jim's life would have been completely different if he had only been born a few years later.

"There was a strong, strong encouragement by the medical community for institutionalization," says Joanne Allgoewer. "It's very, very sad."

She points out that Jim can read and write, adding that her mother was never happy about her son leaving home.

"I heard my mother's regrets about this until the day she died," Joanne says. "She was just in a bind, without any other options."

After spending his early years in the Rideau Regional Centre, Jim's mother moved him back home to the Deep River area for a few years. He and Joanne both attended the three-room school in Point Alexander, where the principal was able to let Jim stay until he was 16.

"At that point in time, my mother was in a bind again," says Joanne. "There was nowhere for Jim to go, and no support available for our family."

Jim was moved into the Ontario Hospital in Kingston, a facility for people with mental illness. Joanne has childhood memories of her older brother's clothes being stolen and of him being paid in cigarettes for working in the laundry.

Eventually, the family was able to move Jim to Edgar, an adult occupational centre near Barrie. There, life was less restrictive. Residents lived in small housing units with a common dining room. They learned trade skills such as woodworking. For Jim, it was a step in the right direction, but he still craved more independence and his family wanted him closer to home. When a concerted effort began in the Pembroke area to help people live independently, Jim was a prime candidate.

"Suddenly, there were options," Joanne recalls.

Jim moved into a group home on Mackay Street. Through the years, various arrangements were tried. Jim worked at ARC Industries and was able to land a job washing cars for Lapointe Motors. He married and, though he divorced five years later, he says it was a good experience.

"Gloria and I are the best of friends now," he says, noting that as an institutional resident he wasn't even allowed to date.

Today, Jim lives at the VON's Civic Complex in Pembroke. His room is filled with electronic gadgets, hockey sweaters and stock car paraphernalia. There are photos of him on outings with his neighbours – a pontoon boat ride to Oiseau Rock and a fall leaf tour to Barry's Bay.

"The whole VON experience has been ideal," says his sister. "We've really found the right balance."

"He's in charge of his own life, and that means so much to him."



JIM DUNN

Shirley Stewart understands. Just three years younger than Jim, she was also moved away from her family in the Deep River area when she was just eight years old.

Shirley spent nearly 20 years as a resident of the Rideau Regional Centre. She now lives in her own apartment in Pembroke.

Jim and Shirley both talk about overeating in the institution. There was little else to do, they say. They've both lost weight and take pride in their health now.

Shirley enjoys a host of activities most people take for granted – going to the mall to shop, watching her soap operas, eating out at her favourite restaurant. She is always eager to prepare her favourite rice dish for family gatherings, and loves being part of the group.

Jannie Porteous says Shirley is a good friend with an important message to share.

"Unlike people like Shirley who have lived in an institution, we've always had choice," Jannie notes. "Shirley sees her role as letting other people know that there are options available for them, and they can lead rich, fulfilling lives."



SHIRLEY STEWART

Shirley and Jim both receive support from Community Living Upper Ottawa Valley. The assistance is based on their needs and their personal goals. Like all community living clients, they are actively involved in planning and setting their own priorities.

"I can't say enough about the support we've received from community living," comments Joanne Allgoewer. "Luckily that old-time thinking is a thing of the past. My brother is a living example that things can be better if only people take the time to understand where he needs help and where he needs to stand on his own."

Editor's note: This is one in a series of articles prepared by Community Living Upper Ottawa Valley. There has been some controversy regarding Ontario's plans to close institutions, including the Rideau Regional Centre. The Pembroke area has embraced independent living for people with disabilities for a number of years. This series highlights some of the many success stories in our community. Individuals and families are invited to contact Community Living Upper Ottawa Valley for more information at 735-0659.