

MEMORIES FLOOD BACK...a tour of Huronia Regional Centre

Robert Denis, Pembroke resident and class action member in the current claims process across Ontario recently made the trip back to Orillia with another previous resident from the Ottawa Valley, and toured the former Huronia Regional Centre (HRC) in Orillia. As Robert toured the institution he recalled some experiences, "I remember being lined up with so many people in the hallway waiting for my shower. It was cold. It was an awful feeling", Robert stated. Robert, a teenager when he went to live at the institution remembers that because he was young and healthy at the time of being admitted, he was not permitted to attend school, he was put to work on the farm. "I got up at 3 am and was taken to the farm across the road to milk cows and work hard.....we never got our breakfast until 8:30 am", Robert continues...." I thought I would get to go to school, I was only 13 years old. The institution in Orillia, known as Huronia Regional Centre closed in 2009. Robert remembers, "teenagers and adults worked very hard; on a working farm, in the kitchen, and were often made to scrub floors and other very menial work." During this interview a few days after Robert completed the tour, and during other recent meetings to complete his claim as part of the class action suit against the Ontario Government, Robert has had memories flood back about the years he lived there. Robert stated, "No one who lived there ever had any time alone, our rooms had rows and rows of beds; whenever we went somewhere, we were always in a group; always shuffling down halls and corridors, lots of stairs and more hallways and tunnels." One of the biggest shocks to Robert on the day of the tour was seeing that elevators existed in the building. During his tour Robert said "I got on the elevator and I told everyone I didn't know this building had elevators, I never saw an elevator when I lived here, we walked up and down the stairs all the time."

April Post a Community Living Worker, accompanied Robert and Ed Christiansen, also a class action member and former resident of HRC to Orillia to take the tour. April told me, when they were standing in one of the large rooms during the tour, which would have been a ward filled with cribs and beds, "I kept looking up at the extremely high ceilings, they looked gigantic to me, and I thought to myself if I was a little child how terrified I might have felt being put to bed in there". The rooms were huge, with a feeling of starkness. The pictures and video's we watched confirmed my feelings, there was no personality, no love, no joy." Robert added, "they put me in solitary confinement it wasn't a good room. It had a bed, a toilet and sink, and they didn't come back to get me until they felt like it".

Ed recalled that he went to Sunday School when he was a boy there, and he worked in the laundry room. Ed doesn't remember when he left HRC, but he remembers after he left he was moved to another institution in Picton, called Prince Edward Heights. Ed was middle aged when he eventually moved to the Beachburg area hosted by a local family for several years. Following that Ed realized a personal dream when he moved into his own apartment. For 13 years in the village of Beachburg, Ed lived independantly with supports from Community Living and close contact from the family he had lived with. While living in Beachburg Ed volunteered at Country Haven Retirement Residence, always stating, "When I retire I will move into Country Haven too." Recently Ed realized that dream as well, taking up retirement at Country Haven in the community that embraced him over two decades ago.



Robert Denis right, listens intently to Marilyn Dolmage who conducted the tour at the HRC.

Memories continued....

Robert and Ed pose outside the former Huronia Regional Centre on October 17th, after their tour.



Robert's journey years later brought him to Pembroke. Robert eventually found employment at The Prospector store in downtown Pembroke and found love for the first time in his life. He met Jackie, now his wife and beams with pride as he describes his life now, "Jackie and I have our own place with our pet dog and we are happy together". "I'm retired now" says Robert. This summer, Jackie and I moved to a new apartment with no stairs, I am feeling pretty good these days". I asked Robert, "What do you think the Ontario government should do with the old institution building in Orillia after the claims process is complete?" Without a moment's hesitation Robert replied, "They should blow the place up, the whole damn place". It was evident to both of us, our interview meeting was over, there were not a lot of relevant questions left to ask after Roberts statement..

Carol Ripley



Marilyn Dolmage comments... On the claims process and tours

I really enjoyed meeting Ed and Robert when they came to visit the former Huronia Regional Centre on Friday October 17th. I was also glad to have met April, I was very impressed by her gentle but unobtrusive support. This tour was the last of 6 visiting "occasions" and on the day Ed and Robert came for their tour several groups of self



advocates from Toronto were also visiting. The MCSS staff on duty that day took a very long time to organize the groups, resulting in Robert, Ed & April waiting for an extended period of time. Eventually we got connected and I also arranged for them to watch *One on Every Street*, a film made by the government in 1960, which showed HRC when it was operating, around the time when Ed and Robert lived there. As things turned out, I think it might have been helpful for Ed and Robert to see the film before their tour. Perhaps it helped them focus their memories. It also turned out there were areas they had lived in that we could not see - both because some of those buildings are now out of bounds, or are so renovated for use by others that they'd no longer would be recognizable.

We came up with a plan to try to make the most of the hour that was left. Ed signaled "praying" and remembered Sunday School; so we went to the auditorium where services were shown in the film. We saw a ward where school boys used to live. Both gentlemen had worked in the laundry; so we saw the old laundry area, amid the kitchens and service areas. We also saw the now renovated working men's cottage from the outside, and we travelled in "the trams" - the tunnels where abuses are known to have occurred. So much about these HRC re-visits has been difficult for survivors, but at the same time helpful. I hope it was reassuring for Ed and Robert to know that not only did they find new homes, but all of the other people got out of HRC too. It's empty now. Some people need to see that, in order to grasp its importance - that no one can ever send anyone back.

In closing, I do hope I was helpful to Ed, Robert and April. I know that they helped me that day. April was patient and resourceful; Ed and Robert were so forgiving and resilient - and together we make the world a better place.

Submitted by Marilyn Dolmage