



Woodlands — 1978

Woodlands: the rise and fall of an institution

On this site in 1878, just seven years after joining Canada, British Columbia opened The Provincial Asylum, soon to be known as the Public Hospital for the Insane.

At the time, many in the settler colony believed that the way to ensure a strong society was to segregate those deemed “insane” or “mentally unfit.” People labelled as such were held in local jails or hospitals, or in Victoria’s small and inadequate asylum, until the province responded to public pressure by creating an asylum in New Westminster. However, the facility here soon became overcrowded and was criticized for its poor construction and unhealthy living conditions.

In 1913, residents labelled “insane” were transferred to a new mental hospital in Coquitlam, known as Essondale, and later as Riverview. People with developmental disabilities remained in the New Westminster facility, which eventually became known as the Woodlands School and then as Woodlands.

At its peak in 1960, Woodlands housed over 1,400 children and adults with developmental disabilities. These residents received little education and had few opportunities or choices. Many experienced physical, emotional, and sexual abuse.

Woodlands closed in 1996 after decades of advocacy by parents, people with developmental disabilities, Woodlands survivors, and their supporters. These panels tell the story of how Woodlands survivors and their supporters created a disability rights movement that succeeded in closing Woodlands and developing community living supports.

Woodlands history

1878 – The Provincial Asylum opens in New Westminster

1950 – After being renamed several times, the facility becomes the Woodlands School

1970s – Woodlands School becomes known as Woodlands

1980s – Through the late 1970s and 1980s, residents of Woodlands start moving into communities with the support of newly created local services

1996 – Woodlands closes after decades of advocacy by parents, people with developmental disabilities, and their supporters

2002 – The Province of British Columbia releases *The Need to Know*, Dulcie McCallum’s report on systemic abuse at Woodlands. That same year, former residents file a class action lawsuit

2003 – The BC Cabinet issues an apology to former residents and allocates funds for counselling. The class action lawsuit continues

2007 – The Woodlands Memorial Garden officially opens

2010 – The BC Supreme Court approves a settlement payment to former residents but excludes those who lived at the institution before 1974

2011 – Former residents of Woodlands lead the demolition of the Woodlands Centre Block Tower, the portion of the main building left standing after a fire in 2008

2018 – The BC Government extends compensation to all Woodlands survivors



Woodlands Memorial Garden

Between 1920 and 1958, more than 3,200 people who died at Woodlands and Essondale (now known as Riverview), were buried in the Woodlands cemetery. When the cemetery officially closed in 1977, the province of BC authorized the removal of the headstones, some of which were reused as building materials on and off the Woodlands site.

When Woodlands closed in 1996, advocates rediscovered the unmarked burial ground and led the creation of the Woodlands Memorial Garden to commemorate these former residents. The Memorial Garden was officially opened on June 22, 2007, at a community ceremony.



We recognize and respect that New Westminster is on the unceded and unsundered land of the Halkomelem speaking Peoples. We acknowledge that colonialism has made invisible their histories and connections to the land. As a city, we are learning and building relationships with the people whose lands we are on.

Parents advocate for radical change

In the 1950s, parents of children with developmental disabilities who strongly believed in their children's capacity to learn began creating educational programs as an alternative to Woodlands. At first, these programs were held in community halls or churches. Eventually, after years of parents' advocacy, public schools included programs for children with developmental disabilities.

Focused on people's abilities and rights to full citizenship, parents across BC wanted to create local support services — not only in schools, but in shared homes, workplaces, childcare centres, and recreation facilities. Parents joined forces with adults with disabilities (self advocates) and other supporters. In 1955, they established a provincial network to help build a social justice movement for community inclusion, a movement that was growing across the country.

Parents of those with developmental disabilities continue to guide community living services as advocates, volunteers, advisors, and organization board members.



In the 1970s, mothers Jo Dickey (left) and Jackie Maniago (right, with her son Norman) spearheaded the creation of the **Woodlands Parents' Group**, initially focused on making Woodlands more responsive and accountable. In 1977, when BC's Minister of Human Resources offered \$2 million to improve Woodlands, the parents turned it down, by then confident that their vision for community living would far surpass any improvements that could be made to Woodlands.

Norman Maniago

Norman was born in 1964. At the age of five, Norman's parents, Walter and Jackie, were advised to admit him to Woodlands. They soon realized that this was not the place for their son. With the advocacy and support of his parents and others, after 17 years, Norman was moved into a home in the community with two of his best friends from Woodlands.

Norman thrived! He attended high school, enjoyed many hobbies and outdoor activities, and he worked part time at Costco for 21 years.

Norman had suffered abuse and neglect in Woodlands along with many others, and in 2001 he was featured in a *Vancouver Sun* special report. Thankfully, Norman maintained his gentle and joyful spirit despite this abuse.

Norman passed away in November 2020 at the age of 53. He lived a full and blessed life, well past the age of 5 which was his predicted life expectancy.



Norman with his two sisters, Christine (left) and Michelle (right).

From parent advocacy came a community living movement

From parent advocacy grew a network of organizations and services across BC that offer support to people with diverse abilities throughout their lifetime — from childcare, preschool, and public school supports, to employment training and assistance, recreational and volunteer opportunities, leadership training, post secondary support, and family support and respite. Thanks to the combined efforts of parents, self advocates, and their allies, many people are now able to live the lives they want with the support they need.

Woodlands survivors speak out

As residents left institutions like Woodlands, they began to organize and speak up for themselves. They formed the BC Self Advocacy Foundation and BC People First to build a strong voice together and inform people of their rights.

Bill McArthur

After Woodlands closed in 1996 and more people learned about the systemic abuse that had occurred there, some former residents launched a class action lawsuit to get compensation from the BC Government for the abuse they suffered. In 2010, the BC Supreme Court approved a settlement payment to former residents, but excluded those who lived at the institution before 1974.

Woodlands survivor Bill McArthur thought that decision was a “gross miscarriage of justice.” He had been sent to Woodlands as a five-year-old in 1964 and lived there on and off for 10 years. Along with other former residents like Shelly Starr and Richard McDonald, he worked hard to ensure that everyone who had lived at Woodlands received compensation. Due to these efforts, the BC Government agreed to compensate all Woodlands survivors in 2018.



Bill McArthur, Woodlands survivor and disability rights activist, speaks at a press conference in 2018.

“I feel that it is so important that this province never be allowed to forget one of the darkest chapters of its history.”

Bill McArthur,
Woodlands survivor and
disability rights activist

Shelly Starr

After living with a foster family for most of her early life, Shelly was sent to Woodlands at age 10 and spent the next decade there. When Shelly left Woodlands, she learned that her birth mother was a member of the Lax Kw'alaams Band near Prince Rupert. She moved there to connect with family, working at a fish cannery for several years, then as a food server at events. She plans to complete further training as a forklift operator.

Shelly helped plan the Woodlands Memorial Garden and witnessed the demolition of the Woodlands Centre Block Tower in 2011. She continues to serve on provincial committees and speaks out whenever she can about the importance of supporting people with developmental disabilities to live in communities. As a member of the **We Survived Woodlands Group**, Shelly participated in the class action lawsuit about systemic abuse suffered by residents of Woodlands.



Shelly Starr with fellow Woodlands survivor Richard McDonald.

“I lost my childhood at Woodlands.”

Shelly Starr,
Woodlands survivor

Barb Goode

As institution survivors began speaking out, other self advocates were finding their voices too. Until the 1970s, residents at Woodlands were sterilized (surgically made permanently unable to have children) against their wishes or without their knowledge. Barb Goode, who was not a Woodlands resident herself, led a national self advocacy committee that testified in 1986 in the *Eve* case at the Supreme Court of Canada. The Court decided that a person with developmental disabilities had rights and could not be sterilized for non-medical reasons without their consent.



Since the early 1970s, Barb Goode has been a passionate advocate for the rights of people with disabilities. In 1992, Barb was also the first person with a developmental disability to speak to the United Nations General Assembly about disability rights.

Making a difference through words and song

Carol Dauphinais

Carol has accomplished her life goals and more — she got an education, found employment, bought a car and a home, served as a union shop steward, and shared a life with her husband Ernie for three decades. Yet for many years, she carried shame and guilt and would tell no one about her childhood of abuse and her eventual placement in Woodlands.

Years after escaping from “the hell of Woodlands” and making a life for herself, Carol felt compelled to write her memoir. The writing process helped her understand what had happened in her childhood and realize that it was not her fault.

Since its publication in 1997, Carol’s memoir *Living with Labels and Lies* has been adopted by many social service education programs, and Carol has spoken in dozens of classrooms inspiring future social workers, teachers, and childcare workers.

Carol’s goal is to help everyone to recognize when child abuse is happening, understand its impact, and have the courage to intervene to make it stop.

In 2000, Carol won the Courage to Come Back Award from Coast Mental Health for her determination and community contributions.



Carol with her late husband Ernie and her 1997 published book *Living with Labels and Lies*.

**“We need to listen to children.
We need to talk about child abuse.”**

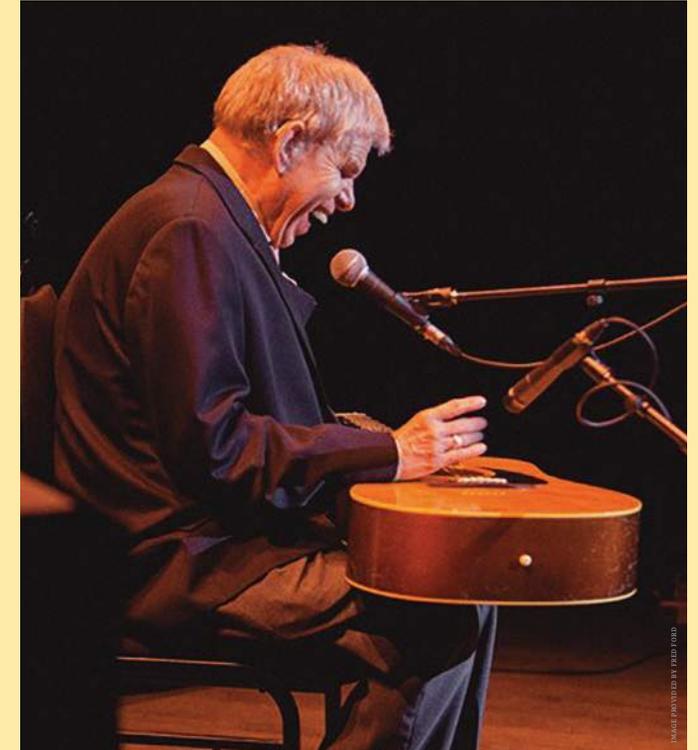
Carol Dauphinais,
Woodlands survivor and child abuse awareness activist

Peter Bourne

Despite experiencing years of bullying and isolation at Woodlands, Peter prefers to focus on the positive. He recalls spending time at the institution listening to his transistor radio and talking to staff about music, television, and current events. It was at Woodlands that a music teacher invited him to sing in his first choir after overhearing his renditions of “Your Cheating Heart” and “Unchained Melody.”

Since 2004, Peter has been a member of the National Task Force on Deinstitutionalization, travelling across Canada to advocate for everyone’s right to live in the community and telling provincial leaders that “institutions are not the way to go.” Peter’s rendition of “We Shall Overcome” has become the anthem for Canada’s deinstitutionalization movement.

Peter was recognized in 2010 with an award from the Council of Canadians with Disabilities for his outstanding contributions to the Canadian disability rights movement.



In 1971, Peter’s cousin gave him a guitar, and within two weeks, he had taught himself to play. Before long, Peter was performing for audiences in churches, seniors’ residences, and at public events — which he has continued to do for more than 50 years.

**“They said I had to go to school,
but Woodlands wasn’t really a school.”**

Peter Bourne, Woodlands survivor

Building lives beyond Woodlands

Sheryl and David Jaud

Sheryl and David hope that no one ever lives in institutions like Woodlands again. They met at Woodlands in the 1960s and spent almost twenty years there. When they left in the 1980s, they lived at first in a large facility with other former Woodlands residents but later moved into a condo with support from a local service provider.

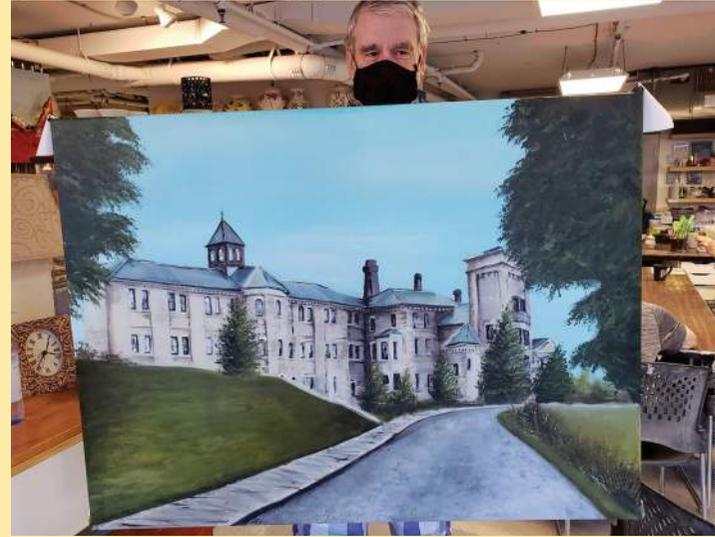
Sheryl loves making art. She has sold her artwork and had a job doing needlecrafts. David volunteered for many years at the local mall, where he was known as the “mall ambassador.” After enjoying part-time jobs for many years, Sheryl and David retired and now like to relax at home, go out to restaurants, parks and the mall, and spend time with Sheryl’s relatives.



Sheryl and David continue to live in the home they have shared for 25 years. They now have live-in support, which enables them to age in place.



On June 24, 1989, Sheryl and David married at Fantasy Gardens in Richmond.



James holding up his painting of Woodlands.



James displaying his painting of the railway at the Quay in New Westminster.

James Lash

James was born in Toronto and started making art as a child. He was sent to Woodlands as a young boy, but later moved into a group home, where he has lived happily ever since.

James has become a well-known local artist, sometimes making work that draws on his memories of Woodlands. Though he is mostly self-taught, he continues to learn new skills at the Community Living Society Pottery Works, where he creates his art. James is a man of few words but multiple talents. He expresses his unique sense of form and colour in both painting and pottery.

From institutional living to community living

Due to the combined advocacy efforts of institution survivors and their parents and supporters, children and adults with developmental disabilities in BC are no longer confined in places like Woodlands. They have a right to education in public schools, and to services to help them and their families live satisfying lives and participate in communities. Still, there's more to do before meaningful inclusion is a reality.

While families can access inclusive childcare, respite care, and other support services, waitlists for these services are long. Today, more teens with diverse abilities are graduating from high school and pursuing further education, yet as adults they still face employment challenges, poverty, and discrimination.

There's more to be done

Though various types of programs and services provide valuable and necessary support, people with developmental disabilities also need friends and family to enrich their lives. They need communities where they feel welcome, safe, and valued. Everyone can help make communities more inclusive.

What will you do?



Kelyn's high school graduation photo, June 2016.

Kelyn Clowes

In previous decades, Kelyn would probably have spent her entire life at Woodlands. Instead, Kelyn grew up surrounded by family.

Due to locally available support, she attended public school and has a part-time, paid job. She has many friends, has studied martial arts for 14 years, and is proud to hold a second-degree black belt.



Artist Linda works on a creation at the PotteryWorks Studio



Lesley excited to get a friendly greeting on a trip to Disneyland



Kurtis working hard at his job

“Hopefully, never again shall people in this province, or anywhere, be imprisoned simply for being imperfect in some way. For no matter how ‘disadvantaged’ a person may be, they have something to contribute to humanity.”

Bill McArthur,
Woodlands survivor and disability rights activist

A collaborative process of listening, learning, and storytelling

As part of the Pattullo Bridge Replacement Project, improvements were made to the Columbia Street and McBride Boulevard intersection, including the creation of this plaza. To acknowledge those who lived in Woodlands, which once occupied this property, the Pattullo Bridge Replacement Project team, along with Inclusion BC and the Community Living Society, brought together a group of individuals to develop these panels. The group included Woodlands survivors, family members, and several people involved with organizations dedicated to supporting those with developmental disabilities.