

Truths of
Institutionalization:
Past and Present

Sincerely, Youth Trying To Stop History From Repeating Itself

A collection of
youth reflections
on the truths of
institutionalization
in Canada



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The following work is a collection of reflections created by Canadian youth as part of

The Truths of Institutionalization: Past and Present

As part of the project, 15 youth from across Canada led an oral history activity with the goal of sharing the stories of people who have survived institutionalization. Five youth from each of the three participating provinces (Nova Scotia, Ontario and Manitoba) met with and interviewed a survivor to learn about institutionalization in their province. Through this experience, participants learned from survivors' lived experiences as a way to better understand human rights issues for people with intellectual disabilities, and increase awareness of the impact of institutionalization.

When creating their reflection, the youth were asked to think about what they learned from the survivors, as well as their own life experiences. By sharing their own perspectives on the experience, these youth hope to help inform the next generation of young people and spark conversations around inclusion and the power of perceptions.

Because of the nature of the content, some of the topics discussed in these reflections are upsetting, and the stories of the survivors are hard to read.

However, these topics and stories are an important part of exploring the truths of institutionalization. It is only by addressing and sharing these truths that we can truly understand the dangers of institutionalization and its consequences.

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Rochelle

My name is Rochelle. I graduated with a French diploma and turned 18 in 2020, during the pandemic! I come from a big family with two older siblings and three younger. In my house everyone is equal and deserves respect. We believe strongly in human rights for everyone. I am excited to be apart of this project and to help be a voice for the people with intellectual disabilities who have been treated unfairly.

Rochelle's Reflection

The name of the survivor discussed in this reflection has been changed to protect their privacy.

Dear readers,

Please prepare yourself, as this letter you are about to read will not be easy to understand or believe. However, this is the truly traumatic, horrific and vulgar story of Mr. John Doe's experience at the Manitoba Developmental Centre.

John's story begins 62 years ago. He grew up in Whitemouth, Manitoba, until he was moved to the Manitoba Developmental Centre in Portage la Prairie. John was a happy child and had no idea, at five years old, his new "home" would impact his life in the worst way possible. John was left to live through hell on earth for 55 years.

At the time, the Manitoba Developmental Centre, and all other institutions, were considered good places meant to house, help and give a good life to people with intellectual disabilities. In reality, this is what a typical day in John Doe's life at the institution looked like:

John woke up alone in his room, which seems to be the only slice of privacy he ever got. In his room there was a bed and a dresser built into the walls, this means John did not have the option to change it. Imagine staring at the same four walls every day for 55 years. John had

one small window in his room with no option to crack it open for fresh air because every window inside the institution was covered by bars, as if it were a prison. The door to his room was locked from the outside, leaving the staff responsible for deciding when John was allowed out. It was almost as though they believed the residents were animals and locked them up in the closest thing to a human cage I can think of. If John was late to breakfast it meant he did not eat until the next meal was served, and if he did not eat his meals quick enough, the food was stolen right off his plate. John had a job at the institution, he worked in the workshop building things. After a long hard day of work, he was rewarded with two dollars. They took advantage of his will to work and belittled him by paying him much less than minimum wage for it. On the other hand, working, even for little or no reward, was better than sitting in his room and staring at the same four walls every day.

The staff were "bad people," Mr. Doe told me. He explained that while he and everyone else in the institution were locked away in their rooms, the staff were free to watch TV, come and go as they pleased, and free to abuse the power they held there. John was mentally, physically and

I told my story to help people get out of there.

— Survivor from Manitoba

sexually abused regularly. He was spoken to like he wasn't a person; cursed at and called names; beaten and abused if he didn't do exactly as he was told, and often for no reason. These punishments were considered lucky. The alternative was being taken to the "lock-up room," as John described it: a small room with padded walls and a small barred window. They were left here for "being bad," for hours and sometimes days.

From my interview with John, I can tell you the next part of his story is the most horrific. Whether John did exactly as he was told or not, being put into the "room at the end of the hall" was inevitable. There was nothing in this room but seven men, teens or boys, and a camera. Here, the men were expected to rape each other for the entertainment of the staff watching through the camera. As if they hadn't taken away almost all of these men's rights, they then choose to rip away the last little bit of respect and privacy they had. John referred to it as a free for all, he said, "everybody touched everybody." Staff often told him to "feel me up" and many other inappropriate things.

I asked John why more people didn't come forward with their stories or tell their families, while they were in the institution, what was

happening. He told me a lot of people there didn't have families; they were trapped, with no way out and no one to tell. They were left to be tortured for all of their lives. I asked if he ever told his friends or family, and his response sent chills down my spine: "No one ever asked." John never told his mother or father. Not only did he have to go through it alone, but he had to relive and process it alone too.

Mr. John Doe is a sweet, kind-hearted soul who likes to watch TV and drink a beer. He loves his family and his favourite food is pizza. He now lives in a house with two roommates, where he can come and go as he pleases — as he should. He enjoys his life much more being out of the institution, but his story will follow him wherever he goes.

John Doe is a human being with rights, just like you and me. There is no excuse for what happened to him, and now, as the youth of today, it's our responsibility to make sure John's story isn't forgotten, so we can make sure this never happens to anyone ever again.

Sincerely,

A youth trying to stop history from repeating itself



Megan

My name is Megan, I am 20 years old, and I am in the Developmental Service Worker program. I am developmentally delayed myself and have a strong passion for helping others who may not be able to advocate for themselves.

Megan's Reflection

When I was doing my interview with Della, the biggest thing that stood out to me is that she didn't let her experience make her give up. She is now an advocate for Community Living, fighting for the same rights for people with disabilities as people without a disability.

I am in the Developmental Service Worker program and we learn about the institutions, but we did not learn about how much the people who survived them went through, and there is stuff the survivors and the public are just finding out about to this day, like where the individuals who died in the institutions were buried. The amount of abuse and torture they went through was horrible and should have never happened. We need more public awareness about what happened so that this kind of thing never happens again.

Della also has habits that she still does to this day due to the strict rules they had to follow in the institutions. If they didn't, they would get punished or abused. For example, walking behind her support workers because, in the institution, they had to walk like soldiers behind the workers; or waiting for the door to

be open for her to go into a building because, in the institutions, the doors were always locked, unless the workers opened them for them. Della also talked about how they were all taught the same thing when they were getting taught stuff, which made me think that schools are still doing that: teaching a lot of the students with disabilities the same content, when they should be matching students needs and abilities. They should be in the stream that best suits them, and not what the teachers think they can handle due to having a disability.

When I was doing my interview with Della, it also made me think 'that could have been me,' as I'm developmentally delayed myself. It made me think how good of a life I have, because I have never been treated like she was, but it could have been me if I was older when institutions were open. It makes me wonder 'how is Della still positive?' She doesn't let her past stop her from being an advocate for everyone, even if they have a disability, to have the same rights, such as voting. She continues sharing her story, making it heard so people know what actually happened in these institutions, and not just what you



“[I told my story so] people would know what was going on in the institutions.”
— Della

read online. It amazes me how many jobs Della has had since being out of the institutions, too.

Personally, having this interview was an experience I will never forget, and I will make sure that I help spread awareness of what actually happened in these institutions. I want to make sure that this kind of thing never happens again. As I am going to be a

Developmental Service Worker in the future, I will spread more awareness and will make sure there is always group homes or assisted living for anyone with a disability can get support they need from people that are trained to work with individuals with a disability. If I ever get the chance to do this again I would take it. Getting people's stories heard and out there is important to me.



Sheyanne

Sheyanne is a 23-year-old Anishinaabe woman from Treaty 2, living on Treaty 1 territory. She currently studies Indigenous Studies and Conflict Resolution at the University of Winnipeg. Sheyanne has been immersed in the intellectual disability culture her entire life, and is a strong advocate for both the Indigenous community, as well as the disability community.

Sheyanne lives in Winnipeg, Manitoba with her two daughters, Harlowe and Hunter. She is proud to be raising her children to be aware of all forms of diversity.

Sheyanne's Reflection

I had the privilege to interview a survivor of the Manitoba Developmental Centre (MDC) institution. I have changed her name to Grandmother Irene. I chose the name Grandmother Irene to help the target audience of this project – youth – make a personal connection to this survivor and her experiences. Grandmother Irene is in her 70s and was subject to institutionalized violations of her own human rights. To put this into perspective for a youth, Grandmother Irene could be any of our own grandmothers. It is our duty to educate ourselves on history in Canada, not only so that we do not repeat the same mistakes, but so we can know what must further change while moving forward.

Grandmother Irene is an Anishinaabe woman who was born and raised in the province of Manitoba (primarily on Treaty 1 land). She was affected by colonization and the intergenerational trauma that followed, as a result she was placed into foster care. Grandmother Irene was placed in the MDC institution at the age of 14 and went back and forth between MDC and temporary foster homes until her late 20s. Grandmother Irene shared some of her memories at MDC with me,

including her first day. A social worker brought Grandmother Irene to MDC, she was scared and wanted the social worker to bring her back to her foster home. Doctors ran medical and cognitive tests and filled out paperwork before they sent her to her assigned room, which she shared with eight other people.

Grandmother Irene was denied access to practicing autonomy. She told me that if she was late for her meals, she was not allowed to eat. There were no books, no games, no music. Patients at the Institution were allowed to watch TV, clean, work, and “sit around.” Patients were made to work at the hospital ward, and Grandmother Irene’s job was to help feed patients. She worked every day until 9 p.m. and was never paid for any of her work. Patients could occasionally go to stores nearby. If late upon their return from work or the store, there were consequences to follow. Misconduct of any kind, including sleeping in and missing meals, resulted in “lock up.” Grandmother Irene said there were three rooms reserved for lock up, there were no beds and the entire room was made of cement. She remembers being in lock up when another girl in lock up died by suicide. Grandmother Irene said the MDC staff left the



I wanted people to know what kind of place it was. It was no good, they treated us bad. People need to know. People might think I’m crazy, but it was a bad place. I was put in a straight jacket for no reason.

– Liz

girl’s body in the room for hours and buried her body later on.

Suicide rates were high at MDC, and Grandmother Irene remembers far too many of her peers dying this way during their time there. The treatment at MDC was so unjust that people were taking their own lives, and Grandmother Irene had to mourn the loss of friends and peers. One friend jumped off of the water tower when running away from MDC staff.

Grandmother Irene ran away a few times during her stay at MDC, she told staff that she was going to the store and did not return. Eventually she would be brought back to the institution, where she would be in deep trouble with staff. She would be sent to lock up, was physically assaulted by staff and was hit in the face by a social worker at MDC when she was accused of stealing money from her.

Grandmother Irene was in and out of the institution and foster homes and became pregnant during her time in a foster home. Grandmother Irene tells the story about a person who was put in a bathtub when her

pregnancy became full term. A staff member put a solution in the bathtub and the person had to sit in it for 20 minutes. She recalls that when the woman came out of the bathtub, the baby was gone, never to be seen again.

After leaving the institution for good, Grandmother Irene met and married the love of her life, and they lived together happily for 17 years before he passed on to the spirit world. She now lives in a small city in Manitoba, where she has her own place. When asked what her life is like now, Grandmother Irene’s response was: “I am doing much better. I can cook and clean for myself, in my own home. I have the freedom to choose my own clothes and shop for my own groceries. I have a pet bird named Leslie who is my close companion.” She also spends her spare time making dreamcatchers, making scratch art and colouring in Ojibwe colouring books.

Grandmother Irene chose to share her story so that she never has to go back to an institution, and so that others are never put in the same situation again. “It’s a bad place to go,” she said.



Lauren

I was born in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia and spend my time writing and playing music. I've attended Riverview Highschool as a part of the class of 2021. I hope to pursue a career in Public Relations and will attend university next year.

Lauren's Reflection

In my interview with Simon, a Nova Scotian survivor of institutionalization, I learned not only about his experience in the institution, but the person he is today. It stuck with me greatly that, despite the mistreatment he received at the hands of the institution from a young age – something that would jade many people – he still brings forth a kind and warm personality.

In our talk, I learned about his life inside the institution and what it was like to have your childhood and teen years stolen by these controlling and abusive systems. He spoke about how abuse took place so often that just a wrong look could lead to an altercation, and how to this day, he always looks over his shoulder, forever cautious and wary of what may be behind him. This is something commonly said by people after exiting the prison system. This is a common theme, as Simon stated that he truly felt like a prisoner. It is heart-wrenching to know that these people who have done no crime, and deserve no punishment, were treated like convicts.

A memorable moment in the interview was when Simon said he never told his parents about his experiences. He never wanted to let them know he was being mistreated and never

disclosed to them what life was like inside the institution. These are decisions that no one should have to make, to withhold such a traumatic chapter of their lives from their loved ones, for their sake. I cannot imagine being a young person, entering the stage of your life that is meant to be spent growing and developing, inside a place like that. No matter your circumstances in life, childhood is not meant to be spent under such harsh control and mistreatment. It is a time to be nurtured, and it is a crime and shame upon our society that we allowed abuse to reach so far and wide across our country. There is a lot owed to the survivors of institutionalization, and the least we can do is educate ourselves on their experiences.

Reflecting on both my talk with Simon and the learning experience I have had about these institutions, I wonder how this is not discussed more. Students need to be taught more about the injustices that have gone on, and in some cases, continue presently. Simon and other survivors are proof that both Nova Scotia and Canada have much more dark history than is commonly shown, but hopefully not for much longer. Only through listening and amplifying the voices of survivors will we know what they

have been through. Over and over again, we see in our country's history that behind closed doors, and in hushed voices, lies abuse and torment. There needs to be accountability for the treatment, and mistreatment, of institutionalized people in Canada. Silence on this issue is not only acceptance, but allowance for repetition in the future. Without change, the experiences of survivors will go unheard and unrecognized. Without educating ourselves and our future students, we cannot progress.

I hope to see more about institutionalization in the school curriculum, as it is insulting to have these injustices happen in our own provinces and home towns without them even being acknowledged. Finally, I would like to take the time to thank Simon for sharing his story with me, as well as all the other survivors involved with this project: we thank you and appreciate you for sharing with us this part of your lives, all for the cause of spreading awareness and education of institutionalization in Canada.



[I shared my story] so the history of institutions for people who have a disability won't be lost.

– Simon



Rhiannon

My name is Rhiannon and I'm 19 years old. I currently reside in Winnipeg. My family is from Sagkeeng First Nation, Manitoba and we are Ojibwe. I graduated from West Kildonan Collegiate in June 2020. I plan on attending University of Winnipeg in Fall 2021. My interests are art and wilderness adventures. I wanted to be a part of this project because I wanted to know more about the experiences of people who have intellectual disabilities. I am glad to have been a part of this project. Miigwech!

Rhiannon's Reflection

The name of the survivor discussed in this reflection has been changed to protect their privacy.

ROAD TO FREEDOM

Written by Rhiannon

I was seven years old when they took me
I didn't understand what was happening
Nerves ran through my body
Every day is the same

Free me
Freedom is what I need
When I'm here
There is no freedom, it is like a jail

Run away, you say
But unfortunately, this is where I have to stay
Nothing seems sane when everything is the same

Rules
What are the rules, you say?

It's waking up at 6 every morning, repeating the same day as yesterday
It's listening to the people that don't hear me
When I need to be heard

I was thirteen years old when they freed me
Finally, I feel the freedom I needed
Joy runs through me like a flowing river
As I allow myself to be free

Now I live my life my way, on my own terms
How it should be
I now feel seen by the people beside me
For me, that's all I've ever needed

“ I don't want this to happen to anybody else; that's why I shared my story. ”

– Survivor from Manitoba



Kass

I am a grade 12 student from Brantford, Ontario. After high school, I am studying English literature and professional writing. As an Indigenous woman, I have always been a true believer in inclusion on every level. I put forward these beliefs in my everyday work with Re:Action4Inclusion and plan to do so for as long as I can!

Kass' Reflection

“I was forgotten.” Joe is an institution survivor I had the pleasure of interviewing. He was only twelve and a half years old when he was admitted to an institution. With having barely met him, his foster parents thought it would be best to institutionalize him before making a connection that could go against what the doctor thought was ‘best.’ The workers and doctors made it seem as though it was a beautiful place when, in reality, it was filled with more horror stories than most dare to dream of. Deception. This was the institutes greatest weapon.

His first day started at the mission ward. He was stripped of his clothing, and his rights. As though a rag doll, Joe was measured and tossed into a nightgown. He was left in this ward for a few months before being placed in his worst nightmare. D3 was meant for adults, not someone who was barely a teenager. Yet, he was thrown in here and made to survive abuse and assault on an almost daily basis. This is no way for someone to live. At this point in Joe’s story, I was ready to break. He was in a ward of 30 grown adults, locked doors, and minimal clothing. I replayed the images my mind created for hours on end. Joe should not have

gone through what he did in just his first few days, but unfortunately it did not end there.

They were regularly medicated; going as far as to call it ‘Candy Time.’ While medicated, they were expected to learn and complete their studies. I can only imagine the difficulty that these ‘students’ would have had with their abusers watching their every move, including while they were attempting to get an education. Thankfully, Joe persevered. He left the institute at 18 and is now a successful artist.

As successful as he may be, I was curious as to how his life is now, after recovering from that trauma. “I can live.” These words left a silence for a few minutes. I had never truly understood how someone could get past such an abusive past. In reality, when surviving an institution, a person has never had a life. Joe’s life began when he left that property, and he has not turned back. He is now open about his story and what he faced in his childhood in order to spread awareness.

“It’s my job as a Canadian, as an Indigenous man, to tell people my story, so people like me don’t end up in places like that. Institutions should never be open.”



“One story can change the world.”

– Joe

Whether it is through his painting, photography, or as a group speaker, Joe continuously amazes me with who he is. He has overcome one of the worst things that could have been done to him, and for that, I admire

him. He shows his strength, passion, and perseverance while also showing the world the amazing art our culture has to offer. I am proud of Joe and everything he has, and continues to accomplish.



Eva

I am 16 years old and live in Stratford, Ontario. I love to travel and hope to study psychology to become a child life specialist after high school. I have been involved with Re:Action4Inclusion for almost four years. I love being part of this movement and I strongly believe that it is important to work towards inclusive communities for all.

Eva's Reflection

Interviewing Joe gave me a new perspective on my life. The survivors of these institutions lived and had to go through an unimaginable life. They were held with no freedom, no choice, no rights, and endured punishments like scrubbing the floors on hands and knees for days; standing up against the walls for hours at a time; physical, mental, sexual abuse, as well as a lack of any sort of healthcare, personal safety or privacy.

Joe ran away 114 times and said that the punishments were worth it. He loved running away because he was finally free and wasn't stuck in the 'hellhole' anymore. It made me think about how we take things for granted when, up until recently, there were many people living like this and no one knew. There is so little said about the institutions because they were labeled as schools or hospitals. In reality, those who lived in them were faced with constant concern for their lives, the abuse that went on there, as well as many people dying from lack of healthcare and being made to sleep outside in the winter.

Canada prides itself on the freedom of our country – "The True North, strong and free!" – when reality is that not everyone was allowed that freedom. What still surprises me is

how little this is talked about, and that it's still going on today. The institution Huronia wasn't closed down until 2009. The abuse and complete absence of rights and freedoms has been known for a very long time, and Canada continued to keep it open. This caused years to be taken away from the people who lived there that they can never get back, and trauma that they will have forever. Joe lived in an institution for around 10 years; those are years that he can never get back.

Joe was in two different institutions for many years of his life, he went through so much trauma from abuse for his existing health problems, cuts and abuse from other residents, and fear for his safety. He has written a story about his life in the institutions, Huronia and Edgar. Despite the trauma it may bring up, he's working to make sure that something like this never happens again.

The interview left me with a few questions about what happened after institutions were closed. What support did all of the survivors get? Because they did not have jobs or necessarily have a safe home to return to. There is a lot of trauma that comes from the institutions. Was there any consequences for the people that worked there and partook in



I want to teach young people what I went through so that it doesn't happen again.

– Joe

abuse or condoned abuse between staff and the people living there? And, finally, why is this talked about so little? I went into this project with some ideas of what happened, but before being introduced to this project I had only heard about it once before. I believe that this needs to be talked about more, and brought to attention so that it never happens again. We learn about the institutions that Indigenous children were placed in and the holocaust so

that these mistakes aren't repeated; it needs to be the same for these institutions for people with intellectual disabilities.

Joe's abuse and trauma from the institutions still impacts him daily and haunts him in his sleep, but he has done amazing things and is proud of who he has become. He now enjoys woodworking and lives in a house with his wife and many pets. He gets to enjoy everything that life has to offer.



Jessi

My name is Jessi. I graduated from Ecole Edward Schreyer School in my hometown of Beausejour, Manitoba in 2019. I was interested in this project because I have family with, and have worked with many people with intellectual disabilities. I am passionate about equality and human rights.

Jessi's Reflection

Names have been changed in this story to protect privacy.

John was in an institution from September 13, 1971, to January 13, 1978. He was only 13 years old when he first arrived. When he told me how young he was, it came as a shock to me, as I have a 14-year-old brother and I still look at him as a baby.

A typical day for John included going to school, working as a dishwasher (which he enjoyed) and spending time in the common room watching TV with his other roommates. John was allowed to have family and friends call and visit whenever they wanted.

When I asked him, John described living in an institution as "it was okay." I was surprised to hear John talk so positively about his experience in the institution. It made me wonder if John possibly forgot his feelings over the years from not sharing his story.

The main rule at the institution was a 9 p.m. curfew and, if not followed, it would result in a week-long grounding. Basic privileges were taken away, and sometimes it would get physical.

When John left the institution, it wasn't under his conditions. The staff there decided for him that he didn't need to be there anymore. After leaving, John went to a second institution. He enjoyed the second institution more than the first. They had the same curfew rule, but people were not punished the same way if it was not followed.

After leaving the institution for good, John got a job with the Canadian Armed Forces. Today John is retired, living in his own apartment, under his own conditions. Some of his hobbies include going for bike rides, and walking down trails.

Overall, I felt shocked that he has had such a positive outlook on his experience living in an institution, and that he has kept that same positive attitude after all of these years. When I asked why it's important for him to share his story with the world, John's response was: "So everyone can know what's going on."



"This project was good."

— Jim



Emma

My name is Rikki Emma-Leigh, but I never liked my legal name, so I use Emma. I am from Shelburne, Nova Scotia. I went to many schools in Nova Scotia, and have lived in many places. I like singing, technology, cooking and helping others. My plan is to work more with people with disabilities. I want to go to school to be a teacher for people with disabilities. I also want to advance my tech skills and maybe go to school for that too.

Emma's Reflection

For my reflection, I interviewed a man from Pictou County. He likes a lot of sports, like track and field and basketball; he also enjoys music, working and cooking. He spent three years living in an institution. He told me about the first day there: he was 13 years old and he was very lonely. He found it hard to make friends, but eventually did. He missed home a lot.

He told me what an average day looked like at the institution too. They would be woken up at 7 a.m., get dressed, eat breakfast, then they would go to school. They got off school at 3 p.m., would do their homework, eat supper, and then have time to hang out with the other people until they were told to go to sleep.

They had a lot of rules to follow. Some of them were: when you eat your meals, bedtime, and when you woke up in the morning. You had to go to school everyday, you had to do chores, and if you did not follow those rules, staff would ground you and take away recreational things. They had a television there, but if you were not 'good' you weren't able to use it either. He also mentioned that the institution told them what to wear, and that if you were female you had

to wear that gender of clothing. He said the institution wasn't supportive of a lot of things, like religion and the LGBTQ community, and he feels strongly that everyone should be able to express themselves.

He said that the place felt like a hospital rather than a home. He told me that a hospital is no place for a person to live, and I agree. He now lives in a group home, cooks all his meals, has had jobs in the community, and has life skills like doing dishes, washing laundry, mopping the floors. He can leave his house whenever he wants and go to bed whenever he wants. He also gets to enjoy sports and other recreational things he loves doing, and would not get to do if he was still in the institution.

He spoke strongly about his message to other people, saying it is important for people to have rights and the freedom to make their own choices. Hearing his story has really opened my eyes to what life is like for people living in these institutions. It made me upset and angry to hear that they were not allowed to do what they wanted, and that they had no recreational activities or sports for the people living there. They would basically just go to school and then



I want people to know what it was like in there — hopefully it will help them change things in the future.

— Adam

go to bed. That's no life for a person to live. I think it's very important for survivors' stories to be heard because most people don't know there are even institutions out there, in Nova Scotia and all over Canada. Something

definitely needs to be done about the institutions that are still open, and I am willing to help out as much as possible. I liked hearing these stories and I hope I get to hear more of them.



Duncan

My name is Duncan and I'm 23 years old. I was born with an intellectual disability, I'm globally delayed, and I was born with one kidney. I recently graduated from a Communication Integration Through Cooperative Education program, focusing on culinary, and received my food safety certification. I am highly involved with Community Living Ontario as a youth delegate, member of the youth advisory committee and a student lead on a Change Project movement in my area. I participate in the Special Olympics and have won provincial medals for track and field.

Duncan's Reflection

Hearing what David went through in his life and how he was treated is very frustrating. Back then, people with intellectual disabilities weren't looked at the same way they are now. They were seen as abominations, or just not understood. Now we are better at embracing differences.

It would be nice if there had been more understanding for David. When David was a kid, his parents didn't understand him. Doctors told them to put him in an institution.

I didn't like hearing how people were treated there. They didn't have any freedom or privacy. David didn't even really get to learn to read and write, and the staff treated him like a kid, even when he was older.

When David was a teenager, he began to defend himself from abuse, and stand up for his rights while he was in the institution. He continued this journey after leaving too. He was involved in class action law suits because he felt it was important to stand up for all of the people who were abused in institutions. He also helped fight for the rights of a non-verbal friend. He did these things because his goal is to make sure all people are treated humanely and with respect. "I don't want little kids with disabilities

today to get sent to institutions or hospitals to live. It's not what people need," he told me.

I had met David a few times before talking about his experience living in an institution, and he is in a good mood every time, he is never upset. He has also given a lot of forgiveness. He reconnected with his parents and even made some long lasting friendships from this negative experience. For someone who lived through that experience, I think it would be difficult to be so positive and strong.

I have a lot of admiration for David and the life he has built since leaving the institution. He taught himself how to play instruments; learned to drive and got a job as a driver; got married and has his own house with his wife. Like David said, "My life shows how wrong people's perceptions were of what I was capable of. Never say someone can't do something."

I can't relate to David in regard to his experience in the institution, but I can relate as someone with an intellectual disability. It was hard hearing the assumptions and negative repercussions he faced, but there are things that need to change still too.

We're all people and discrimination is not called for. We are all the same inside, and don't need



"I wanted to be part of this project because I want people to know the truth about what happened to us. I tell my story because I know some people can't tell their story. By speaking out, their voice can be heard. It's important for people of all ages to know the truth about what happened to us."

— David

stereotyping or the rejection of things that are different. People still make assumptions about what people are capable of. I have challenges with reading and writing too, but I have an easier time with the practical and hands-on things, like building something or cooking; you just need to tell me the instructions. In my own life, in high school, I never got told what was

going on with my education. I wasn't included in the discussion or the plan, and that was very frustrating. I don't want other people to go through the same thing; that's why I do work trying to educate employers and teachers to make sure they understand that we're all capable.



Abby

Abby graduated from high school in 2020, and is pursuing her post-secondary education during the pandemic. She lives in Winnipeg, Manitoba. Abby has a lifetime of experience with people with intellectual disabilities and, from a young age, has had a real passion for human rights and disability rights. She has been an advocate for friends and family to ensure they are treated equally in our society. Abby has grown up knowing Dave, and is proud to be a part of this project and share Dave's story.

Abby's Reflection

Hello, my name is Abby, and I'd like to walk you through the life of my friend David. He is a strong, kind soul, who lived through hell from age 14 to 32, simply because he has an intellectual disability. We tell these stories because, as today's youth, it is our job to make sure history never repeats itself.

63 years ago, David's parents were told about a school that he could go to with other children with disabilities because, back then, kids with intellectual disabilities weren't allowed to go to 'regular' school. That school had the disgusting name of 'Home for the Incurables,' later to be called the Manitoba Developmental Centre (MDC). They told David's mom that he would live there, learn, and made it seem like a nice place. So, like most other parents, his mom sent him there because she thought they would be able to help David have the best life he could. But, it was the polar opposite. He was living in a nightmare for 18 years.

When I asked Dave what a normal day at the institution looked like, he replied, "Everyday was the same." He shared a room with 31 other boys, and there was only one male staff member watching over them. He told me that if they didn't wake up for breakfast, they weren't allowed to eat until lunch.

"So if you got up, you went and had breakfast, then what?"

"Nothing."

"Did you go to school?"

"No...What kind of school was that? We didn't learn anything there."

Instead of learning, David worked in the laundry room, or helping out in the kitchen everyday, where he would get paid 70 cents — every two weeks.

The washrooms had no privacy. No walls, or stalls, just a row of toilets and showers. David told me he was only allowed to shower Tuesdays and Fridays, and that everybody showered at the same time. The boys would take showers and "be dirty" with each other. And, at night, in his room of 31 boys, the boys would again "be dirty," have sex/rape each other, and most staff would just let it happen. He said some of the staff would get mad at them, but the boys would just tell them off.

I asked Dave about some of the rules at MDC. He told me bed time was at 10 p.m., but he would give them a hard time and not listen. So I asked him what would happen to him if he didn't follow the rules. He said, "nothing." Dave wasn't scared of the staff members. He knew what was happening was wrong and he stuck up for himself. He told me the story of one of the staff members, Paul Miller. He said one night, Paul was beating up one of the boys and noticed David watching. He said, "What are you looking at? You'll be next." And David said, "Two hits Paul. I hit you, you hit the floor," and the man walked away. Dave said



I tell my story so everyone knows that place is bad. I tell my story so no one ever has to go back there.

— David

they were scared of him. He said, "I would have killed him that day." David tells that story a lot, and he tells it with pride.

But, not everybody was as strong as Dave. He told me that a boy hung himself in the dining room one night. The door was supposed to be locked, but that day, he doesn't know why, nobody locked it. He also told me the story of one of his friends there, Joyce. She climbed 150 feet up the water tower in the middle of winter, and jumped off. Many people inside saw her take her life through the windows. He said he wished she told someone. "She never told anyone she was going to do it."

Families could visit every week, but they weren't allowed to go "up there." They had a specific area to visit in, and before they came, the staff would tell them that they would get in a lot of trouble if they told their families about the bad stuff going on. David would also get to go home to visit his family sometimes, but before he left, staff would tell him the same thing. But, David did tell his mom, and his mom would phone MDC and ask what the hell was going on over there. And, when David went back, they would lock him up in solitary confinement for a full week, with no form of contact with anyone.

David ran away from the institution nine times. He told me about one specific time when he told one of the staff members: "I'm going to run away one night." The staff member said "then go," and Dave said, "Well I can't, the door's locked." The staff member unlocked the door, and told him to go, so Dave went, and made it all the way to Winnipeg from Portage La Prairie, which is about an hour away. That staff member got fired for letting Dave go. I asked him how he got to Winnipeg and he said, every time he ran away, he would hop onto the cargo trains that were close to the institution. The ninth time Dave ran away, his mother decided enough was enough, and Dave never went back.

Today, David is proud to live alone in his own apartment, where he gets to be the holder of his own key. He is well known in Canada as an advocate for shutting down institutions and making sure people get to make their own decisions about where they live and who they live with. David shares his story with today's youth because he knows we can make sure this never happens again. MDC was shut down this year and David and I, as well as many other advocates, have a plan to go watch when they finally tear down that awful building to get some peace of mind.



Chantel

My name is Chantel. I am 23 years old. I was born and raised in Halifax, Nova Scotia. I was diagnosed with a non-verbal learning disability and Autism Spectrum disorder when I was eight years old. I'm a member of The Club Inclusion, a registered charity in Halifax that provides social, cultural and recreational programs that are accessible to all people. I'm on the Halifax Special Olympics swim team, and a special needs cheerleading team. I plan to attend university to study psychology, and creative writing. When I graduate my dream is to publish a magazine for girls with various disabilities.

Chantel's Reflection

Jeff lived in an institution on Waterville, Nova Scotia in the 1980s, from age 20 to 25. The institution that he lived in had two different units, a mental health unit and a rehab unit. Jeff spent time in both units. He was in the mental health unit three different times, each for about two to three months at a time, and spent a year in the rehab unit.

When asked about what a typical day was like at the institution, Jeff explained that he and the other residents spent most of their time just sitting around in a locked wing of the building, not having anything to do. There were very few programs or activities planned throughout the day, so residents were often very bored. However, there were a few learning opportunities to develop skills such as cooking and carpentry, as well as job placements, which Jeff participated in. His job was to sort beans. Jeff also had the occasional visit with family. His mother and stepfather would come to visit once a month.

Along with there not being many activities and programs for the residents, Jeff explained they were often treated like kids, and there weren't really any set rules, but if you misbehaved, staff would take away your cigarettes.

Eventually Jeff was able to get a job at a car wash/dealership in New Minas. He would travel back and forth from the institution in Waterville to New Minas everyday for work. He really enjoyed his job.

Today, Jeff says that his life is a lot better. He lives in his own place in the Nova Scotia Annapolis Valley as part of an assisted living program. He enjoys spending time with his girlfriend, fishing and going for drives. Jeff says that, in some ways, being a survivor does still affect him, but in other ways, it doesn't. He lives by the motto "the past is the past."

When I asked Jeff why he feels it is important to tell his story, he said that he wants to help younger people learn to see signs of mental illness at an earlier age, to not be afraid to reach out, and not to wait until it's too late.

I learned a lot from my conversation with Jeff. I can't imagine what it would be like to live in a place that is supposed to be a home for you, but have nothing to do, and no freedom to go out into the community. I am the type of person who loves to plan different activities for myself and others, and I thrive on structure, so I don't know what I'd do if I didn't have that

“It's important to share these problems with youth so they can deal with these problems ahead of time. Suicide rates are increasing and these systems are why. They deserve better.”

– Jeff

opportunity. I feel for Jeff and other survivors who had to go through that, and so much more. These institutions are a horrible part of Canada's history and need to be shut down. The fact that there are still some institutions open (specifically here in Nova Scotia) scares me. I know times have obviously changed since the 1980s, but history can not be erased, and if we don't talk about it, and don't have people like Jeff sharing their stories, things like this will continue to happen.

Section 15 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms states that:

Every individual is equal before and under the law and has the right to the equal protection and equal

benefit of the law without discrimination and, in particular, without discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability. (2) Subsection (1) does not preclude any law, program or activity that has as its object the amelioration of conditions of disadvantaged individuals or groups including those that are disadvantaged because of race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability.

I want to live in a world where this statement is not just heard, but followed by everyone, especially those who have a position of power. For example, the people who ran those institutions. Nobody deserves to live in a world where their rights aren't being respected.



Jake

My name is Jake. I'm a 17 year old Writer and Autism Advocate from Hantsport, Nova Scotia. I like to write Fantasy and Science Fiction stories based on the adventures of my many D&D characters. I seek to break down the stigmas we as a society have made in regards to people with Disorders and Disabilities. I fully intend to achieve this goal with a pencil in one hand, and a can of Root Beer in the other, working until the aforementioned deed is done.

Jake's Reflection

I remember it vividly, even though it's been days since that interview, at least a week or two at the time of my writing this. Despite that, it is still burned into my memory. I remember standing up, and punching my closet, wondering how a Human could treat another Human the way they treated George. I stood there racking my brain for answers. Answers I knew I likely wouldn't receive, nor like. This is the story of George, a man from Windsor who survived institutionalization, and has given me the honour of sharing his past.

Let's start with answering a simple question: Who is George? Well, George is an individual who likes travelling to new places, eating at restaurants, gathering with friends, and chasing women. I met George on a Zoom meeting one fateful April evening. He was sitting there drinking his coffee, his support worker moving about in the background. I was there to interview him, I didn't even really know him, and I was about to ask him to tell me about what was likely the most traumatic thing he had ever been through. But, I introduced myself, he introduced himself and his support worker, and the talk began.

In 1960, at age six, George was sent to The Nova Scotia Youth Training Centre, in Truro. He was

sent there because he has brain damage, and a learning disability, due to an accident he was a part of at age three. He spent ten years there, where he would be strapped for seemingly minor things. Strapping is a punishment where they tie down your hand and hit it with a belt a certain number of times. This was one of their primary disciplinary methods. They followed a very strict schedule around there, with the staff's word being law. If you broke it, you'd be strapped, even if it was a minor thing.

George left the Training Centre at 16, in 1970. Due to the things he'd gone through during his time there, he turned to substance abuse as a means of coping with his trauma. This is what made it click with me just how bad things were in there. Thankfully, he has since recovered and got clean, but it still flabbergasts me that what happened to him was so bad that it caused him to turn to substance abuse.

He said he still has nightmares. Yet, for some reason beyond my comprehension, this man has the bravery to still talk about what occurred. I asked him why he felt like it was important for survivors to share their stories. He told me that he wants to raise awareness; to make sure that what happened to him, never happens to anyone ever again. He said



[I shared my story] for the youth to understand what it was like to live in an institution so they can realize how important it is for everyone to live in community.

— George

he also wants to help make sure people know there are programs out there to help them, as well as to trigger the creation of more effective programs, so that the people who need them can access them. He is brave enough to say that he survived, and he told me he enjoys talking about what happened to him, and that it helps him sleep better at night. He hopes that the people who read this will understand, and ensure this kind of thing never happens again. He wants nothing more than for people to stop labelling disabled people as disabled, and instead just treat them as people.

To be totally honest, I don't feel the words I put down here are enough, and that the word limit they put on me isn't enough to fully share George's story, or how thankful I am for him letting me tell it, and how much I admire him for his bravery. He doesn't want to be in an institution, he wants to be out in the world, and be a part of the community. I think that's a pretty reasonable request. The bravery and kindness that I feel coming off George is something I don't think I'll ever see the likes of again. I hope that by my writing this, he gets the peace he deserves, because he deserves it.



Oskar

Oskar Balch was born and raised in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia where he lives with his parents and sister. In his free time, Oskar enjoys hanging out with friends, as well as building and fixing things in his garage. Oskar graduated from Dartmouth High School, class of 2020. He will be attending Dalhousie Engineering in the fall of 2021, where he will pursue his goal of becoming a mechanical engineer.

Oskar's Reflection

Hearing Craig's experiences while living in institutions, the biggest shock to me was the amount of control that institutions have over their residents. It shocked me how militant the institutions are with their control, and how they will punish residents in harsh ways for even the slightest deviation from their rules. While living in an institution, you are confined to a building and are forced to spend your days doing chores with little time for relaxation or socialization. Your freedom to choose how you spend your time is stripped from you, and any attempt to regain control over your freedom is met with punishment. The most shocking example of this punishment is a small isolation room in the institution. "If you act up in an institution, they'll throw you in there," says Craig. "You'll have to go in with nothing but the clothes on your back."

Not only are there rules specifically to limit the freedom of the residents, but there are people whose job it is to enforce them. After hearing this, I was floored when Craig told me that the people who worked there were called councillors. For me, the word councillor makes me think of summer camp, or someone whose job it is to both keep you safe and make sure you have fun. However, Craig's version of what a councillor is,

is very different from mine. As Craig described it, a councillor is someone "who's just there for the money, so they didn't give a shit about us." I still cannot wrap my head around this, had I not known the context of what Craig was telling me, I'd have thought he was describing prison. Unfortunately, this is a reality for many survivors – a reality that not enough people are aware of.

While hearing Craig's story, I felt many emotions of anger, sadness, and disappointment. But, as our meeting came to an end, I found myself feeling happy and had a smile on my face. Craig lives in his own apartment with his two guinea pigs and is involved in his community in an extremely positive way. This is what life should've been from the beginning, but the system had failed him and continues to fail many others. After talking to Craig, my perspective on Canada's history of institutionalizing people with intellectual disabilities was not changed, but rather solidified. I have always believed that for a community to thrive there must be diversity. Everyone has strengths and weaknesses, that is a fact. For people living with intellectual disabilities, these weaknesses are often more obvious at first glance. But, with those weaknesses, there is a side that far too many people don't see. That side is their strengths. In my experience, people with



[It was important to share my story] so others do not have to go through the heartache I went through.

– Craig

intellectual disabilities are some of the kindest, loving, and open-hearted individuals that I've ever had the pleasure to meet. I believe that one of the core reasons for this is their experiences. Craig is an excellent example of this: despite asking questions that brought back memories that I can only imagine were painful to recall, Craig couldn't help but keep cracking jokes and making me laugh. He kept coming back to the positive things in his life, and how happy he was now. Just by talking to him, you can tell that this is the energy that Craig spreads throughout his community. Speaking to him made me appreciate the sheer amount of perseverance that he has demonstrated in his life. He has survived what most can't even imagine and has overcome every hurdle that's been thrown at him.

Living with an intellectual disability can be very difficult, many people will dismiss you right away based on unfair judgements. "There's a lot of people with disabilities, and people treat them like shit," says Craig. As a result, people who live through this know the pain of being unfairly judged and do not want to inflict that pain on others. They know that there is always more than what meets the eye, and in turn, give

everyone a chance to show their true colours. This overwhelming kindness and ability to show love indiscriminately is something I believe to be extremely important. In communities and workplaces where this type of diversity is shown, you can see the positive effect it has.

After asking Craig what he wanted me to take away from our conversation, he said, "I think the institutions have to be closed, and people have to stop judging people with disabilities." That is a statement that I think everyone can agree with, because judging and institutionalizing people has no benefits. Inclusion and understanding are what needs to happen. Kindness spreads, and in communities where people with intellectual disabilities are embraced, you can see what difference it makes. This is why I believe it to be so important that we continue to make an effort to move people out of institutions, and into communities. When someone is living in an institution, not only is their experience terrible, but they are not able to make these positive impacts on communities. When everyone is given an equal opportunity, society benefits greatly from it and we make the lives of many better in the process.

This resource is the result of a youth-led oral history initiative conducted by the *Truths of Institutionalization: Past and Present* project. We have developed an interactive, online curriculum composed of six modules. The modules are geared to a Grade 10 classroom but are relevant to learning across the lifespan. We recognize that the way forward is in sharing stories – especially with young people.

The goal of the Truths Project is to fill a very real gap in the education of young people in Canada. The role of institutions for people who have an intellectual disability is rarely found in any school curriculum. The real-life effects of institutional mindsets on the experiences of people who have an intellectual disability are not explored in school. We need to learn about institutionalization like we learn about residential schools, slavery, and the evolution of women's rights. We need to bear witness to the truths of institutionalization. We need to recognize the patterns that continue to deny people their rights as Canadian citizens.