

Orillia Packet & Times

# Painful memories haunt father

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**On** March 31, the Huronia Regional Centre will close its doors for the last time, more than 120 years after the historic institution for the mentally disabled was established on 150 acres overlooking Lake Simcoe.

To mark the closing of the HRC and recognize decades of contributions by staff and their many fond relationships with clients, The Packet & Times anyone who has a connection to the institution to write down their most colourful recollections or particularly touching anecdotes to capture the spirit of the place and its character. This is one of those stories.

*I have been following your series on the Huronia Regional Centre with mixed emotions.*

*Retiring to Orillia 17 years ago, I have purposely never driven through these grounds. Finally, spurred by The Packet's articles, I did so last week. I was moved to tears with memories that are almost 50 years old. May 31, 1959. That was the day when my 5-year-old daughter, Diane, was*



Submitted photo: In this photo taken in Couchiching Beach Park in 1960, Jack Gourlie holds his six year-old, mentally disabled daughter Diane, surrounded by his other children, clockwise, Bill, 8, Jeannine, 4, and Lynda Lou, 9.

*placed into the institution. At that time, there were no orientation programs for family. Since there were no facilities where we lived*

*in Toronto, we were sent to Orillia. Driving through the gates, I was struck by the absence of any persons around the grounds. The buildings*

*seemed so cold looking and foreboding. It seemed deathly silent.*

*I took Diane by the hand and we managed to navigate the crumbling staircase. Dressed in her best pink dress, she was excited about visiting this unknown place, bouncing with happiness, trusting that her dad's hand would never be parted from her. Yes, she was deemed retarded, but she did not lack emotions or feelings.*

*Within what seemed to be mere seconds, our name was called by the receptionist and a very business-like woman appeared, took Diane's hand, and they disappeared behind a swinging door.*

*I blubbered something to the woman behind the counter about saying goodbye. She advised me that their experience was to have no goodbyes. I was handed a sheet of paper with the address and phone number and two lines in bold type that said, "NO VISITS FOR A MINIMUM OF 30 DAYS. CALL AHEAD TO SCHEDULE ANY PROPOSED VISIT." I retreated to my car and sobbed uncontrollably. Thank goodness I hadn't brought my other children, ages 3, 7 and 9 with me.*

*Our first allowed family visit was in early August. The three siblings had missed their sister and were excited to see her and her new home. Soon we were told that the first visit was for a very limited amount of time. It was a total disaster. Passing through the swinging door, we were greeted by a chaotic din. The woman who brought Diane was not unfriendly, but seemed extremely*

*overwhelmed and harassed. We were told we had to stay in the room. The reunion was tense, traumatic and brief. The goodbyes were tearful and solemn. Driving back to Toronto, there was an unaccustomed silence, broken only by muffled sobs.*

*Diane was in Orillia for approximately 10 years. During that period of the HRC's history, there were few programs for someone of her age and capabilities. It was mainly, if merely, a custodial situation, one that did not seem to address her emotional needs or provide chances for learning or growth. One day we visited unannounced and were told that she had been moved to Gravenhurst. Although we learned she would now receive some programs, still it was a major shock. No prior notice had been given the family.*

*Diane spent 20 years in the two large Institutions. In the early '80s, she was moved to the program of small group homes in Toronto, under the auspices of Toronto Community Living (similar to Simcoe Community Living).*

*I have no doubt that the large institutional staffs meant well, and I'm sure there were many angels in their ranks, but at that time they had to deal with overcrowding, understaffing, poor facilities and therefore minimal programs.*

*Now in her 50s, Diane is extremely happy in the group home program. She is nourished and cared for. She gets love, hugs and guidance, and is making fine progress, getting the most out of life of which she is capable.*

*She goes by bus every weekday to a sheltered workshop where she does crafts and participates in the activities of daily living. Our family has frequent visits, parties and trips, and even an occasional sleep-over. Rather than being in a custodial situation, she is now in an optimum environment.*

*Thank goodness times, philosophies and treatments have changed.*

Jack Gourlie

Readers have been sending in some wonderful, some sad accounts of their personal experiences at the Huronia Regional Centre, which closes at the end of the month after more than 120 years at that location.

If the stories we have published have brought back any memories you would like to share, please take the time to write them down and pass them on to us at the Packet. HRC has been described as a community within a community. Did you have experiences there that capture the spirit of that unusual place? Do you have a story, perhaps involving the underground network of tunnels or the old farm that once operated on the north side of Memorial Avenue? If you have a good story or photo, please take the time to share it with us.

Please email your material to [cmckim@orilliapacket.com](mailto:cmckim@orilliapacket.com) or mail a hand-written account to The Packet & Times, 31 Colborne St. E., P.O. Box 220, Orillia, ON L3V 1T4.