



The Woodlands bathrooms were often scenes of near-drowning and whipping of children by staff. Bill McArthur photo.

Woodlands justice in doubt

> BY ROXANNE GREGORY

Bill McArthur was seven in 1963 when his mother left him for the first time at Woodlands School. His mother said it was a summer school—but she didn't tell him he couldn't go home. Bill was hyperactive, but he was also highly intelligent, and he soon learned the lessons of survival at Woodlands.

"In the morning they would line us up for the washroom. I remember seeing people tied down to toilets and staff pouring hot water over their genitals to make them go. I was afraid all the time," he told the *Georgia Straight* in a recent interview.

"There was a nurse...She found a staff member in bed with a patient and she reported him. They fired her," he said.

McArthur said he was sexually assaulted by staff, but what he feared most was being forcibly submerged in tubs filled with ice water until he nearly drowned. Another boy he knew was repeatedly confined inside a canvas sack and held underwater. "This was the way they controlled your behaviour," he explained matter-of-factly.

Although the recent and belated coroner's inquest into the tragic death of 19-month-old Sherry Charlie has renewed calls in B.C. for greater social-services oversight and accountability, abuse of children while in government care has a long history here—beginning decades before little Sherry's death.

And a recent court decision might deny former child victims of institutional abuse the justice they've sought for decades.

In February 2000, a chorus of complaints from former Woodlands School residents found a short-lived voice in the local press. In response, the B.C. government commissioned

then-former ombudsman Dulcie McCallum to write an administrative review of the provincial facility that provided residential care for hundreds of children between 1950 and 1996.

McCallum's review, completed in August 2001 and released by the province in July 2002, found widespread sexual, physical, and emotional abuse of children at Woodlands, as well as unexpected and uninvestigated deaths. The physical mistreatment included "hitting, kicking, smacking, slapping, striking, restraining, isolating...very cold showers, very hot baths resulting in burns, verbal abuse, extended isolation, wearing shackles, and a belt leash with documented evidence of injuries including bruising, scratches, broken limbs, black eyes and swollen face".

Woodlands survivor Gary Hill told the *Straight* of a nightmarish practice: "Lots of kids had all their teeth pulled so they couldn't bite staff....After I left Woodlands, when my dentist was working on me, he said my mouth looked like they used a shovel."

McCallum urged the government to apologize and compensate victims—and not by revictimizing them through a judicial process. Without success, she urged a second-stage investigation of the systemic abuse. No Woodlands staff member has ever been charged with abuse or assault.

Almost 3,000 people who died in government care and were unclaimed were buried at Woodlands between 1926 and 1957. In 1977, a Social Credit cabinet order-in-council resulted in the people's headstones—about 1,800 of them—being pulled up and the area grassed over and redesignated as a park. McCallum discovered that some of the headstones were used to construct a staff barbecue patio and stairs. After 1958, unclaimed bodies were sent to UBC as cadavers.

Although the government apolo-

gized in 2002 and pledged a \$2-million fund for counselling, the money isn't just for the estimated 1,500 survivors of Woodlands. It's also for residents from three other facilities—Essondale, Valleyview, and Tranquille—and, to date, not a dime has been released to any survivors.

Survivors attempted to launch a class-action lawsuit against the provincial government in 2002, but the Liberals stalled, arguing that the suit should be brought by the office of the Public Guardian and Trustee and not by an independent North Vancouver law firm, Poyner Baxter.

In 2004, a B.C. court decided otherwise, and in March 2005 the class-action lawsuit was certified before Judge Nancy Morrison by attorneys from Poyner Baxter.

In a March 2005 news release, attorney Jim Poyner said: "We hope that government will now finally recognize that serious damage has been done to a very large number of people, and work to expeditiously correct decades of evasion." Despite the class-action certification, a year later no court dates are pending.

ON WOODLANDS' bucolic 26-hectare grounds at McBride Boulevard and Columbia Street in New Westminster, almost 1,600 children lived in lock-down conditions at any one time inside outdated buildings that formerly housed B.C.'s "lunatics".

Established on the New Westminster cricket pitch in 1878, the Public Hospital for the Insane was a castlelike fortress overlooking the B.C. Penitentiary and the Fraser River. In 1950, the B.C. government, which ran the facility, decided to separate disabled children from adult lunatics (who were sent to Essondale), and the institution was renamed the Woodlands School. Woodlands became home to

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the province's unwanted kids.

Babies abandoned at birth in hospital, the hyperactive, the epileptic, the intellectually challenged, the disabled, wards of the court, and children displaced by the closure of Vancouver's orphanage all lived within its walls and cottages.

But Woodlands wasn't a school you could graduate from. In fact, in 1973 there were only 12 teachers there for about 1,600 residents. Once children were committed to Woodlands, they often lived there for the rest of their lives—that is, until the province closed the facility in 1996.

Despite McCallum's report and horrifying statements by former residents in news reports, on November 24, 2005, Children and Family Development Minister Stan Hagen told the legislature—in response to a query from Opposition critic Adrian Dix—that the government "disagrees" that there was "systemic abuse" at Woodlands.

Hagen also neglected to mention that Woodlands children were used in genetic research and drug experiments for more than 30 years. Between 1954 and 1978, almost three dozen research papers, including drug studies, were published by the then-medical director of Woodlands, Dr. Bluma Tischler. Research continued until 1986.

In 1978, Premier Bill Bennett praised Tischler's work at Woodlands when he announced a fellowship in her name. "Dr. Tischler has conducted outstanding research...during the past 24 years. Her more than 35 scientific publications have made such an impact that Dr. Tischler has increased the knowledge of scientists throughout the world," he said in the legislature.

(One published paper was about extracting urine samples from children by inserting a needle through the abdomen above the pubic bone and aspirating the fluid with a syringe—a method of obtaining a sterile sample that is commonly used today in uncooperative cats and dogs.)

Not everyone agreed with Bennett's adulation, but those who were critical of the way children were cared for at Woodlands met with dismissal or worse.

In the fall of 1972, Marie White had been working at Woodlands for almost 10 years. She was head nurse of the isolation ward, and she was worried. According to a letter from her attorney, Brian Stanton, to Woodlands superintendent Pauline Hughes—and copied to Opposition health critic Bob McClelland, who read it in the legislature—her complaints about alleged sexual abuse of children by a janitor fell on deaf ears. Her concerns that kids were also being overmedicated and that there wasn't enough control over access to drugs elicited no response from the administration.

When she couldn't get the administration to act, she threatened to go to the media—a threat that sealed her fate in a scenario mimicking a script from TV's *The Prisoner*.

According to Stanton, while working one day in November 1972, she was told by the director of nursing that she was unwell and required immediate treatment. Neither the nature of her alleged sickness nor the treatment required was revealed by her supervisor. She was escorted to Dr. Hughes's office. (Besides being superintendent of Woodlands, 10 years earlier Hughes had been involved in genetic-research experiments there.)

Once inside Hughes's office, according to Stanton (who is now dead), White was confronted by a Dr. McKenzie, whose first name is not mentioned in the letter. McKenzie told her she was being committed to a private facility for the insane for her own good.

Stanton wrote that when White tried to resign on the spot, McKenzie called for an orderly and a matron. They took her from the office and bundled her into a waiting car. Despite having no committal papers, she was admitted and sedated at the Hollywood Sanitarium in New Westminster, from where they planned to send her to Riverview for 30 days. However, according to a

May 7, 1973, article in the New Westminster *Columbian* newspaper, her daughter intervened and secured her release with the help of Stanton's partner, Norman Einarsson.

As Stanton wrote to Hughes: "In short, our client was seized, abducted, imprisoned, drugged, and reported as insane for the purpose of protecting certain improper procedures at the Woodlands School."

As the *Columbian* noted on December 29, 1972, B.C.'s NDP health minister, Dennis Cocke, under pressure from the Opposition, belatedly asked for an investigation.

The *Columbian* reported in January 1973 that Cocke had ordered the month previous that White be reinstated without loss of wages, and the attorney general, Alexander Barrett MacDonald, announced his office would also conduct an investigation, but in January White had still heard nothing about her reinstatement and Hughes refused comment when the *Columbian* came calling.

At the time, White told the newspaper: "I am quite willing to go back to Woodlands to work. But I haven't heard from Woodlands at all. When I receive instructions to return to work in writing, I will go back. But they haven't written to me yet, nor have they sent me any money."

Three months later, White was still not working. By May 1973, though, Woodlands gave her five months' salary, a lump sum to pay her lawyers, and another job in an undisclosed government institution. The *Georgia Straight* was unable to ascertain her present-day whereabouts.

COCKE'S INVESTIGATION wasn't the first review of abuse at Woodlands. Ten years earlier, there had been the so-called Amos Gill inquiry into abuse and the misappropriation of funds at the facility.

After the March 2005 class-action lawsuit became certified, hope was beginning to dawn for Woodlands survivors, but in October of last year many of them learned they may

never be compensated for the abuse they suffered—even if the class action is successful.

A little-known court decision in October 2005—the Arishenkoff ruling—may have decided the fates of Woodlands survivors who were abused before 1974. In 1974, the government passed the Crown Proceedings Act, which allowed the Crown to be held liable for the actions of its employees.

The Arishenkoff case arose out of abuse at residential schools where Doukhobor children were interned by the B.C. government in the '50s and '60s. But the Arishenkoff ruling meant that liability for injury or abuse can't be laid at the government's door retroactively—if the alleged wrong was done before the Crown Proceedings Act became law.

The Arishenkoff case wasn't even before the courts when lawyer Jim Poyner first tried bringing the Woodlands class-action suit.

On October 31 last year, a frustrated Poyner told Woodlands survivors at one of their regular meetings: "If we hadn't had to fight to represent this group for the last three years, we might have already reached a settlement. This is really bad... Only a political decision can make this right."

Len Zimmer, who lived 18 years at Woodlands, was devastated by the news of the Arishenkoff ruling. "I thought I was going to have a heart attack," he told the *Straight*. "It's just so unfair." Zimmer was born in Essondale (now Riverview)—B.C.'s psychiatric hospital where, post-Second World War, up to 4,000 B.C. residents languished in the care of only seven doctors at any one time.

Zimmer spent the first years of his life at Essondale, until he was moved to Woodlands in 1954 at age seven. Conditions inside Woodlands weren't better; they were worse. Zimmer said he was repeatedly sexually abused and tortured by staff until he finally won his freedom by escaping in 1972. For years, Zimmer said, he tried to tell his story, but the police didn't

believe him and no one else listened.

Sexual abuse of children was widespread within the institution, members of the Woodlands Survivors group told the *Straight*. McCallum's review found sexual "assault, intercourse and in the result, injuries and in a few cases pregnancy".

Bill MacArthur, the boy who was dropped off at "summer school", is angry at the way Woodlands survivors have been treated by government. "I want everyone to remember what happened at Woodlands so that it never happens to anybody again... A whole group of people will be denied justice with this [Arishenkoff] ruling," he said.

Luann Bradshaw was 12 in 1961 when her parents' divorce divided her family. Her mother, Amy Reiter, told the *Straight* that she put Luann in B.C. government care at Woodlands for a weekend to get some doctor-ordered rest for herself. When she tried to bring her daughter home, staff refused to release her. She said she was assured Luann would get good care at the facility. But that didn't happen.

Bradshaw is an independent and outspoken critic of Woodlands. "I was determined not to let myself become permanently damaged. I'm a long-time survivor because of that," she told the *Straight*. "I've been in the [survivors'] community for 22 years. The physical, social, mental, and psychological torture at Woodlands was ongoing. They would make you go hungry. They took your home visits away, even your phone calls... They made you kneel for hours at a time on a hard wooden floor until you could hardly move..."

"There was an all-male ward where everyone getting out of the bathtub got badly whipped. They became so scarred they could hardly stand.

"And there was slavery. I'd make 30 to 50 beds a day, every day, and I folded thousands of diapers each month for \$12. Woodlands was a deadly prison. No one deserves to go through what we had to go through."

Will there be justice for the forgotten children of Woodlands? ♦