

The Progressive History of Community Living St. Marys and Area

By Dan Rankin

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Day in and day out in the small Ontario town of St. Marys, the dedicated employees and volunteers at Community Living St. Marys and Area are continuing a tradition that dates back over 50 years, taking progressive steps to promote inclusion and improve the quality of life for people with developmental disabilities and families. Their efforts have been far-reaching, influencing associations across the province, and setting the St. Marys association ahead of others when it comes to taking steps to create a more inclusive community.

Looking back at how adults with developmental disabilities were treated by organizations and institutions across Ontario as recently as the 1970s or 1980s can reveal some harsh realities.

Barb Taylor, former board president for the association that became Community Living St. Marys and Area, first joined the group as a volunteer in 1974. Back then, Ontario doctors would recommend that parents of developmentally disabled children have their offspring sent to live at one of the province's "regional centres" or "hospital schools." There were 17 of them in all, and they were in operation until as late as 2009.

"A basket of clothes arrived on the floor everyday and people went through it and put something on," said Taylor. "They didn't own anything. Nothing was really theirs."

All elements of choice or risk or unpredictability were cut out of their lives. "Outside, there was a trail worn in the grass because all they did was walk around in a circle," she said, describing another trip to the Oxford Regional Centre in Woodstock one warm spring day. "We were sitting on a bench talking about something when a group came out. They were on a rope like a kindergarten class, and they were all wearing sweaters and hats and mitts. It was certainly a really warm day. I asked a staff member why they were wearing what they were and she said, 'it takes them a while to adjust to temperatures'. I said, 'yeah, right'."

Taylor also remembers seeing residents at a facility being kept busy with chores reminiscent of the old 19th century form of prison labour known as the shot drill.

"I asked a man in a workshop what it was he did," she said. "He said, 'well, they bring me in things and put them at the end of the table there. Then, the first person puts this thing on and it goes along. When it gets to the end and they're all done, they're put in that bin, and it goes to the next table, and they take it all apart again.' He knew perfectly well what he was doing was absolutely useless work, and certainly not something anyone would pay him for or appreciate, and yet, they didn't have any choice. That's what they did all day – take these things apart and put them back together."

When Taylor started at the association in St. Marys, the programs they put on for developmentally disabled adults did not exactly resemble what was happening at the regional centres – in fact they were developed by parents as a reaction to the centres – but they were informed by the same sorts of conceptions about what disabled people needed and what they were capable of.

In St. Marys, these programs consisted of segregated workshops, mainly, in which attendees would spend their days in groups doing woodwork, metalwork, baking and ceramics out of sight from the community as a whole.

Richard Oliver, 69, attended his first workshop in the basement of the St. Marys Public Library on Oct. 5, 1964. One of his first projects involved bending metal pins for the DeLong Scovill pin factory along with about a dozen other people.

“The pay wasn’t hardly anything,” he said. “We were on a disability pension, so we could only get so much pay.”

The association grew as more community groups, in particular the Kinsmen, got involved and, in June 1968, the first James Purdue Centre opened on Ingersoll Street.

When Taylor joined the association about six years later, under manager Al Bennett and secretary Joan Lang, the participants built picnic tables. “It was really good work for people to do; they felt a real sense of accomplishment when they got these tables done,” she said. “I just found it was an amazing bunch of people that were all different, but all got along.”

As the years went by, the wood shop and a spin-off cleaning business both became really successful, but helping to find the ~~mentally~~ disabled adults of St. Marys places to live became a top priority for Taylor and the association, as did providing them with the skills they would need to successfully live on their own.

“At the beginning, [people using service] lived at home,” Taylor said. “But then their parents started to age, and their kids were not going to be able to live at home, obviously, forever. So, we talked about what we might do.”

Members of the association visited a group home where eight people were living, Taylor said, and it didn’t take them long to decide this wasn’t how they wanted to do things in St. Marys. “They had their share of problems with their personalities,” Taylor said. “The only thing they had in common, really, was a handicap.”

The association decided then, in late 1978, just as a new James Purdue Centre was getting ready to open on James Street South, to work on finding individual homes and apartments for the people they served, as well as staff to look after their needs. “We always tried to do things a little differently than everyone else did,” she said. “It wasn’t always easy, but it seemed to me it worked better.”

Simultaneous with these changes was a drive to bring home people who were originally from St. Marys and the surrounding area, but who had been sent to the province’s different regional centres.

“People were being shipped just randomly anywhere they could find a place for them,” Taylor said. “We just felt, if we could bring them back where they had family, or where they had some history, that it would be better for them.”

New blood was brought into the association around this time, with eventual residential manager Marilyn Haywood starting to work at the James Purdue Centre in January 1979, and Bud Carter replacing Bennett as general manager several months later.

“Bud was a visionary,” Haywood said. “A dreamer. He started thinking about things like helping people in their homes. So, we started the Supported Independent Living Program. I would spend two-to-three hours, two-to-three times a week with people, teaching them skills like how to cook, how to clean, how to bank and shop, etc., etc.”

As the clients were learning, so was the association staff, Haywood said. "Something that was really key with that organization is that they were all about learning," she said. "We were bringing people in that were really big names in the disability community to figure out stuff and to be challenged. They were coming to tiny, little St. Marys and giving speeches and challenging what was going on. People were excited about it: a little community who wasn't building group homes, and who was looking at different ways of helping people find employment."

But there were other powerful people, such as those in charge of the regional centres, that were not as interested in changing how disabled people were treated. "There wasn't a thought of closing the regional centres down," said former association board chair Allan Slater. "You had to go in and drag them out."

"I wouldn't say that we were popular," said Carter. "We were against the grain. These people were the ones who needed the resources of schools and the community the most. They were the most vulnerable, and they got the least. They got taken away from their family, their brothers and sisters and their parents. These folks were really hurt by that."

When they eventually did arrive back in St. Marys, the association strived to maintain a high level of support for them so they could adapt to life in the community, Slater said. But, as some of the "risks" that come along with independent living were introduced into the lives of people using their service, the association soon found that they were capable of a lot more than anyone had realized. This lesson introduced a whole new way of thinking for the group. "We learned it's not a case of making people ready to be in the community," he said. "It's a case of making the community ready to accept people as they are, and build on their abilities."

Added Carter: "We basically figured out that the most important thing we could be doing would be helping people connect to others in the community and build relationships. Through work is probably one of our biggest opportunities to meet people."

Thus, in St. Marys, the idea of maintaining a segregated workshop fell out of fashion much earlier than in other communities around Ontario. "People don't need to be congregated together," Haywood said.

In time, the association also gradually evolved how their staff provided support. "We were over-supported people," she said, explaining that, as they went, they learned that some people needed less support than others, or had different goals for themselves. "We were novices. Nobody could tell us how to do this because nobody had done it."

This evolution led the St. Marys association to decide to no longer provide homogenous "programs" to its clients, but to instead develop individualized "services."

"Having programs for people to take part in is not what normal people are doing," Taylor said. "We decided we would provide different things for people. We tried to get people into jobs in the community, and find things they would be interested in, and that they might earn some money at. So, they worked at stores, or a restaurant, or in one of the factories. It was one-to-one with a staff member and then, as they learned the job, that got pulled back. That was the idea."

Throughout the mid-1980s, the association conducted a great deal of strategic planning and training for how a transition from programs to services would work. It became official on Dec. 9, 1990 – "Moving Day," as they called it. From then on, staff members were hired to work for a specific person as part of a team. The people they were serving would no longer be treated as 'clients', but seen simply as citizens of the St. Marys area. One support worker could help someone get ready in the morning, assist them at their job or volunteer

position, and later on, help them prepare a meal. The person using the association's services and their family would be placed in the centre of all decision-making. Soon, the cost to provide services per-person in St. Marys was \$70 less per-day than if they were in an institution.

By 1995, the James Purdue Centre's sheltered workshop was closed for good – over 20 years before the Ministry of Community and Social Services announced, in November last year, that it would begin phasing out sheltered workshops in the province. The Centre's workshop and old cafeteria have become a meeting room and kitchen. "We transitioned the building into office space quite a number of years ago now," said current executive director Marg McLean.

"The support happens in people's homes, wherever they are through the day," director Jen Leslie added.

For some, including the parents of disabled children, these new concepts seemed very foreign from the ones they grew up with. "They were told their child was very disabled and shouldn't live anywhere except in an institution, so it was hard for them to trust that their son or daughter was going to be okay," Haywood said. "But, some amazing stuff happened. A lot of organizations would turn people away if they were too disabled. Not one person ever got turned away from Community Living St. Marys and Area for that reason. Not one."

Take Ken Harris, for example. "We had one wonderful man who was hidden in a barn most of his life," recalled Taylor. "His parents had sent him to school, and his teachers said he was not able to learn. It was a waste of time. So, they took him home and kind of hid him in the barn. But, when his parents were older and his dad got cancer, they decided to sell the farm, and they didn't know what to do with him."

A branch of government funding permitted the association to hire someone for the summer to teach Ken how to live on his own in an apartment, as well as teach him other skills such as cooking and doing laundry.

"He got so he could look after himself pretty well, and he eventually went into a really nice apartment in a big fourplex," she said. "There were two elderly ladies who lived in the place who thought for sure he was going to murder them in their beds, and were terrified when he arrived there. But he loved that apartment, and was so enthusiastic about what he did at the James Purdue Centre, that he finally enticed them to go there when there was an open house one day. They went, and they became very staunch supporters of the association, and said Ken was such a wonderful person."

Those in attendance at the association's June 20 Annual General Meeting heard that they currently support 59 people, ranging in age from three to 94. Most live in and around St. Marys and Stratford, though some live in the communities of Exeter, London, Strathroy and Petrolia. These people are supported by the 94 people on the association payroll, including full-time and part-time workers, as well as students.

At that same meeting, Community Living Ontario director of membership Keith Dee congratulated the St. Marys association on its legacy of progressive innovation, and for demonstrating a commitment to "nurturing" the community, and "welcoming people as valued and contributing citizens."

"These are relatively new concepts for many organizations, but for St. Marys, you've been doing it for years, and getting well-known throughout the province for showing this kind of leadership," said Dee. "You were the real leaders and continue to be the leaders."