

Humble Beginnings, the Early Years

The St. Marys Association for Retarded Children was certified on July 7, 1962 and chartered in October of that year. Mr. W.R. Kirk, executive director of the Ontario Association for Retarded Children, arrived in St. Marys to present the charter and explained to citizens what the provincial organization tried to do in Canada and what the local organization could strive to do in St. Marys and district.



Jesse McKillop, first president of the association, chaired the meeting at St. James Parish Hall. Other charter members were Elizabeth Hanly, Helen Crosby, Frances Blackmore, Shirley Hackney, Carl Schaefer, Vera Courtnege, Charles Hall, Cliff Waters and Betty Bell.

Ms. McKillop worked hard with other community members to form the association and fill a gap in the community. Betty Bell said there was support of family members before the association was formed, but little else. "A lot of people hid them," she said of trying times. "a lot of people didn't want to recognize them." William and Betty Hanly drove to London every other week to attend meetings at Princess Pat School. For three years in the early 1950's, Ms. Bell took her son, Brian, to the Children's Psychiatric Research Institute in London each Monday so he could learn to walk and talk. Mrs. McKillop, the mother of a 'handicapped' child, was involved in a Hamilton organization for developmentally challenged people before moving to St. Marys. "It was a lucky day the day Jessie McKillop came to St. Marys," Ms. Bell said of her friend.

The St. Marys Association for Retarded Children began seven years after the Hanly's son moved to an institution in Orillia.

Two years after charter, the St. Marys and District Occupational Training Centre was organized for developmentally handicapped adults. Originally at the town's public library, it moved to the (former) Friendship Centre, and, after that, the town's (former) post office.

Stanley Crinklaw was director of the centre. "It is apparent that the new centre will perform a much needed function by filling a great gap in the lives of handicap persons," the St. Marys Journal Argus published in October, 1964.

The James Purdie Adult Workshop and Training Centre opened in 1967.

The Ingersoll Street facility was named for a Kinsman and planning committee member. James Purdie died before completion of the project. Tom Watt donated the land and the Kinsman played a big part in the workshop completion.

The association got a name change in 1968, becoming the St. Marys Association for the Mentally Retarded (the 'and district' tag was added 13 years after that).

In 1973, the James Purdie Centre closed after a Stratford company hired all of its workers. That was short-lived, however. Within a few months, the company folded and St. Marys residents working there attended a workshop in Stratford. In 1974, the James Purdie Centre reopened and grants from the federal government allowed for development of new programs and new staff.



The new \$200,000 James Purdue Centre on the corner of Elgin and James Streets, its current location, opened in November, 1978. Some 30 adults were employed via industrial contract work. Among the guests were Vera Purdue, mother of the late James Purdue, association president Barbara Osborne and St. Marys mayor Clifton Brown. The town purchased the property that formerly housed a cold-storage plant, for \$13,000 and sold the land to the association for \$1.

Another major milestone, the apartment support program, began in 1980. The association bought a building on Queen Street West in 1982 then purchased the Park Street apartments for \$35,000 the following year. Renovation costs on Park Street cost another \$110,000.

At capacity, Park Street could accommodate seven people in three two-bedroom units and a one-bedroom unit. A former Mormon meeting house, four tenants moved into Park Street. That group, originally from St. Marys, moved here after the Bluewater Regional Centre in Goderich closed.

The government of the time said it felt institutions should be scaled down because they were too expensive. Staff at the facilities were afraid of losing their jobs and tried to convince parents that returning to the community was a bad idea. There was concern community placements would not be permanent.

“Our association is over 20 years old, and has a strong and well-established foundation,” then executive director Bud Carter said of the housing issue. “Our commitment to these people is founded on the principle that they should have the opportunity to (enjoy) a lifestyle that approximates normal family life in the community of their choice.”

A five-year plan to close six institutions meant as many as nine people with ‘mental retardation’ may be moving into the community, wrote association employee Kathleen Flanagan.

“We feel people can learn the skills that will allow them to participate in and add to the community,” said former association board president Barb Taylor.

“There is nothing magic about institutions,” Carter said. “There’s nothing that can be done in institutions that can’t be done in the community. Mental retardation is not an illness to be treated in a hospital setting. The people residing there have few human rights.”

Carter said the cost per-person in an institution was \$100 per-person, per-day. Community program costs in St. Marys then averaged about \$30, factoring in apartment settings and including rent costs. Under Carter’s leadership, the organization became the St. Marys and District Association for Community Development, part of a trend away from labelling people by their ‘handicaps’ and in reflection of a new goal. Originally established to provide a framework for developmentally ‘handicapped’ people to work, the association (now) places more emphasis on instigating integration into the community, Carter told the St. Marys Journal Argus.

Sandra Gregory, a resident of the William Hanly apartments and worker at the James Purdue Centre, said she was glad to leave the Southwestern Regional Centre in Cedar Springs.

“It was good to come out of there, to be closer to my family and I don’t have to use my wheelchair and walker anymore,” she said.

John O’Brien: “Community cannot be manufactured; it is not a commodity or the reliable outcome of any professional activity. It arises when valued personal involvements with a network of others gives rise to purposeful action and celebration.”