

Community From This Side: Murals & Mirrors

The 50th Anniversary Project

**Grande Prairie & District Association
for the
Mentally Handicapped**

August 2005

Introduction:

In the shadow of the Second World War and the exposure of the eugenic movement's promise-turned-horror, families of persons with developmental disabilities increasingly rejected institutionalization of their loved ones, especially their children, as being the 'right thing to do'. The enormous physical destruction, smashed dreams and nightmare stories of the camps, give some account to why families in post war Europe changed their minds in this way. Why similar families across North America also took the decision of keeping their children with disabilities at home, and in their communities, may be less clear but it has been nonetheless important a phenomenon here.

Community From This Side: Murals & Mirrors does not try to directly answer this question of why such a remarkable change took place. Instead, it tries to tell the stories from this community about "What happened next?"; What happened here on this side... this side of the hundreds of decisions made to stay home and live here.

In a very real sense what began in Europe and soon thereafter in North America and Australia in the late 1940's, became an experiment... an experiment 'in community'. An experiment that has as surely touched the life of Grande Prairie and its neighbouring towns and villages, as much as it touched anywhere else. A new generation of people with developmental disabilities would grow up in this city and in the villages, towns and farmsteads across the region. They, their parents, their relatives and their neighbours would slowly, sometimes painfully, sometimes ecstatically, make their way into a "brave new world that has such men in it".

Community From This Side relates the stories that make this mural of our history; our history in this place.

What a community does to, with, or, for, its most vulnerable members tells more about that community than it does about vulnerable people. Even though many of the stories inside this project are specific to a person or a family, they are at the same time often reflections of the community; reflections of ourselves in the mirror of another person's experience of us.

Many people living here today inherit the results of this history, both for good or, in some cases, ill. Through the last 50 years community services, social acceptance, education access, public policy and personal discovery, were likely never more influenced by person's with developmental disabilities. We would like, one supposes, to both argue and demonstrate that never in our history have persons with disabilities been more respected, valued and supported than they are now. Still, it tends more to be the case that we 'take for granted' what exists today and lament what is left undone, rather than understand what has happened, continues to happen and, in such things, find cause to celebrate.

If we are ever to celebrate though, we must understand something of where we've been, who we are and how we got here. So, to understand we need to hear stories... all the stories. Stories of the families, of the people with developmental disabilities, of the neighbours, the teachers, the friends, the relatives, the legislators... all of them.

...all of us.

This is a story of Grande Prairie, Alberta, Canada and of the Peace region of northwest Alberta where it is embedded. It is a story in many parts, told in many voices. It's the story of the Grande Prairie & District Association for the Mentally Handicapped but it is equal parts mural and mirror; the reflection of ourselves in lives of others and the vignettes, or stories, we use to describe ourselves. There is no "special" position or perspective; no narrator beyond this introduction to tie things up in a neat package. Good and bad are here. It is messy, personal, inspiring, heart breaking, politically incorrect at times and deeply human.