



Led by Vancouver designer Erik Lees, a new memorial garden will bring to light a forgotten cemetery at the infamous Woodlands institution Photo-Dan Toulgoet

Honouring the dead

By Tom Sandborn-contributing writer

The dead are invisible here. Under the fierce summer sun, the slope of ragged lawn and stately trees behind the now abandoned Woodlands institution at the corner of McBride and Columbia in New Westminister doesn't look much like a cemetery. Down the hill the derelict buildings of the province's former institution for developmentally challenged patients brood over more than a century of sorrowful history.

In contrast, a cheerful billboard announces that a new housing development will be built here soon. A bronze plaque, riveted to a small boulder beneath a towering sequoia, is harder to find than the real estate billboard, and it only tells the curious visitor that he's standing in a park "dedicated to the memory of those residents who died in provincial institutions 1900-1955." Nothing on the plaque tells the visitor he's looking out over the graves of more than 3,000 of those residents. From the 1920s to 1960, inmates who died on the grim wards at Woodlands and the provincial mental hospital at Essondale were buried on this gentle, grassy slope, their graves marked by simple cast-concrete headstones.

The plaque was installed in 1978, and bears the name of William Vander Zalm, then the province's Minister of Human Resources. Also cast in bronze is a Bible verse that promises, "The needy shall not always be forgotten. The expectations of the poor shall not perish forever." An air of bitter irony hovers over this solemn promise. The government of the day had ordered all the headstones in the cemetery removed just the year before the plaque was installed.

The headstones were scattered in storage sheds, used as paving stones and fill, and left to crumble into the soil. Some of the removed headstones, in a macabre twist, were used to build a picnic area and barbecue for the Woodlands staff. A few still lie in grim disorder, nearly invisible beneath the draped branches of a nearby weeping elm. Local dogs roamed freely for decades and left the gravesites deeply soiled with feces. Despite the promise on the government plaque, there was no evidence that anyone but grieving survivors thought to remember or honour those who lie buried here.

A nearly completed project will end that neglect. Designed by Vancouver landscape architect Erik Lees and prompted by former Woodlands residents and their supporters, the Woodlands Memorial Gardens will open on the cemetery grounds later this year. First called for by community groups like the B.C. Association for Community Living and the Self Advocacy Foundation, a group made up of ex-Woodlands residents, other developmentally challenged individuals and their supporters, the memorial will retrieve the lost dead of Woodlands and Essondale from the shameful neglect that has left them invisible for decades. The garden, funded by the B.C. Building Corporation, will feature a reflecting pool, wheelchair accessible pathways, a

spring, ornamental plants and low-slung walls. The approximately 500 headstones that survived three decades of neglect and dispersal will be mounted on these walls. The names of the remaining dead, for whom no headstones survived, will also be on permanent display.

For Richard McDonald, a former resident of Woodlands, the memorial gardens will tell the people of B.C. about a dark part of its history.

"It was not so pleasant to live at Woodlands," said McDonald, who lived at the institution from 1952 to 1962. "The opening will be our accomplishment. We need to tell these stories. We need to be in history."

Woodlands, opened in 1878, was finally closed in 1996, with almost all of its former residents transferred to community living settings, part of a trend in North America at the end of the 20th century to de-institutionalize people who had lived in "total institutions" like Woodlands. The New Westminister institution housed, over that period, thousands of residents, the population reaching its peak in 1959, when 1,436 people lived on the wards. Some were victims of what a 2001 report to the Ministry of Children and Family Development frankly labelled as "systemic abuse," including instances of physical violence and sexual molestation.

Nine years old when he entered the institution, McDonald was 19 when he was transferred to the Tranquille institution in Kamloops. The current president of the Self Advocacy Foundation and one of the key figures in the development of the Woodlands Memorial Gardens project, he has searing memories of life at Woodlands.

"It was quite scary most of the time. No matter where you looked, there was abuse happening. Some people were beaten by staff. I saw a staff member use a belt on a resident once. If you complained or ran away, you got stuck in the side rooms for punishment and fed bread and water. Sometimes they put us in straight jackets," he told the Courier in a phone interview. Residents who endured sexual abuse, he said, were warned that if they reported the abuse, they'd be thrown into the punitive "side rooms."

The design of the new gardens will reflect their often painful daily lives. The visual focus of the memorial will be a sculptural installation called A Window Too High. The sculpture is a full size reproduction of one of the most heartbreaking details in the Woodlands story, the barred windows set so high in the walls in many of the wards that inmates couldn't see out. Not only were the residents invisible to the world, the world was also invisible to them.



Headstones laid neglected and scattered under a willow tree, contradicting the message on a nearby plaque "dedicated to the memory of those residents who died in provincial institutions 1900-1955." Photo-Dan Toulgoet

Set on a broken, rough-edged corner fragment of wall and looming ominously over the graves, the sculpture is a nightmare reminder of how dark and constrained the lives of Woodlands residents could be. When the garden is completed, the Window will stand over and be mirrored in the nearby reflecting pool.

"The stories about not being able to see out of the windows had to be expressed," said Lees.

The pool, in turn, will be filled by a stream flowing downward from a hill to a spring, and will be flanked by a grove of trees.

"This setting reflects the darker part of the Woodlands experience," Lees noted. "But it isn't meant to be gloomy. The plantings will grow and evolve, and both neighbours and former residents will, we hope, use the gardens as a site for reflection and contemplation."

McDonald believes the changes in his life and the lives of other former residents since the closing of Woodlands will be reflected in the existence of the memorial gardens.

"It is a better life for us out in the community," he said. "We'll help other self-advocates around the province do what we did. We'll help other handicapped people do this for other graveyards around the province. Some people are afraid to tell their stories, but our support groups help people." McDonald now lives independently in his own apartment in Vancouver.

Pat Feindel, communications director for the B.C. Association for Community Living, which has been involved with the Woodlands Memorial Gardens project since it began in 1998, says the project "has had to address a painful past as well as be respectful, contemplative, and aesthetically pleasing... a tall order." She believes it's succeeded.

Feindel's B.C. Association for Community Living and the Self Advocacy Foundation sponsored the From the Inside/Out event at Vancouver's Roundhouse Community Centre in 1998. The event, which made public the lost oral history of the generations within Woodland's walls before it closed, uncovered many references to the forgotten cemetery. As a result, Woodlands survivors and their supporters within the community wanted something visible done on the old burial ground. The Memorial Gardens project, developed in close collaboration with community members and representatives of the B.C. Building Corporation, is the outcome of their campaign.

Controversy exists around the project. Gregg Schiller, who works as an advocate with the We Survived Woodlands support groups (founded four years ago and serving 24 ex-residents across B.C.), is critical of the provincial government's willingness to fund the memorial gardens even as it balks at calls to compensate the Woodlands survivors. Money for the approximately 1,500 remaining Woodlands survivors should come first, he argues.

"A class action suit has been prepared, but we shouldn't have to go to court to get something for what happened to people at Woodlands. Why are they spending hundreds of thousands of dollars on a garden before helping people who suffered? I'm not opposed to the memorial, but the gardens shouldn't come before compensation," he said.

Cathy Anthony, mother of a developmentally challenged son and a worker with Simon Fraser Society for Community Living, supports the call to compensate former residents. Her great uncle, Arthur Thomas Davis, died at Woodlands in 1934 after a life spent on the institution's grim and lonely wards. But she also supports the memorial as a vital contribution to the community at large, to Woodlands survivors, and to people like her son Joshua, who lives with her at home in the community.

"When we first found my great uncle's headstone, I reached out and touched it," Anthony said, recalling her discovery of her relative's headstone in a neglected storage shed on the Woodlands grounds.

"It felt like a personal connection... like our family had finally found him. He wasn't lost to us any more. It was like a message from him to Joshua, a message that my son was an important, valued member of the community, who wouldn't be forgotten the way so many of the Woodlands residents were. Without the gardens, there's a danger we'll forget what happened at Woodlands. The project will be a garden of memory and celebration, a teaching site. It will honour the dead as valued citizens, not people who can be erased and forgotten."

Lori Woods trains people to work with developmentally challenged clients who would have been warehoused in institutions like Woodlands in the past. The Douglas College instructor takes her students to visit the Woodlands cemetery at the beginning of each term. She also volunteered retrieving and cleaning the headstones that had remained in storage on the institution's grounds.

"The cataloguing of the first 300 stones in a tiny garden shed on the Woodlands property in 2000 remains one of the most powerfully emotional days of my life," she said. "We spent that day lifting heavy gravestones, brushing off the dirt and mud and bugs and spiders and worms. We alternated between sadness and outrage, but mostly we felt very honoured to be there. We were able to acknowledge each of those souls whose grave marker stone we touched."

That acknowledgement will become a permanent part of the Lower Mainland's public spaces when the Woodlands Memorial Gardens formally open this winter. The long wait of the hidden dead will soon be over, and the Lower Mainland will gain a compelling space to learn about, remember and honour them.

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