

Episode 1: Rideau Regional Centre & the History of Institutionalization in Canada

In memoriam of all the lives lost to the harms of institutionalization

This episode was recorded on the [unceded](#) territories of the Algonquin Anishinaabe.

Full Script

A note that this episode contains discussion of ableist violence, sexual, physical, emotional and mental abuse, coercion, confinement, neglect, self-harm, suicide, and torture. Take care of yourself & be kind to each other.

Joe Clayton: The school was at Rideau Regional Centre in Smith Falls Ontario. But it was the same place when i went. I remember they called us out for candies. And candies were pills and medication. And they would give us these pills to take, and we would space right out. and you'd be all dopey and we couldn;t learn very much because we had all these nightmare, these things in your mind. And it was so hard on us. And they were so angry and people were so upset in school. And i still think about it to this day and i say **“why did this happen to me and so many canadians?” Did they hate us? Why? And that question, the rest of our lives we will be asking, why? Why did they give a shock treatment? Why was i sexually assaulted every night for six years?** Every night. Sorry. There were people who were murdered in there. There was other institutions where they found unmarked graves. They didn't get out of it. Sometimes I think about “was that fair?”.

Hey, I'm Megan. I am a disabled researcher and writer passionate about understanding and making known the conditions of disability and institutions in Canada, and this is Invisible Institutions— a podcast about the long history of disability confinement in Canada, and it's ongoing impacts on the lives of people labeled with intellectual/developmental disabilities.

You heard Joe Clayton at the start, he spoke to documentarian for the Truths of Institutionalization, an online learning experience that creates awareness, promotes respect and encourages reflection on human rights of people who have an intellectual disability in Canada.

He's a proud Algonquin man, artist, storyteller, and survivor of the Rideau Regional Centre. Opening in 1951, as the Ontario Hospital School, Smith Falls, Rideau was the largest of the, publicly-operated institutions that operated across Canada. At its peak the regional centre confined more than [2,650 people labelled with intellectual disabilities](#).

For generations, the label of intellectual and developmental disability has been used to isolate, congregate and confine infants, children, and adults. Once given the label of intellectual disability, thousands of people were removed from their communities, and warehoused into

large-scale institutions far from their homes, their families and their communities. In these institutions, people were removed of their autonomy, their decision making power, their rights and their safety.

Joe Clayton: And it was called the admission ward, where they strip you down naked, Where they measure you, and measure your whole body. They give you a night gown to wear, and in triage D, in tri D you get your civilian I mean your clothes that they plan to wear for you. It was embarrassing for me because they're stripping you naked and examining me and everything else and then then they left me to stay in the admission ward for a week or 2. And then they brought me in to a ward. It was 3 D and there were male patients and they were 18,19, 20, 30 years old and i was only 12 and a half years old. You imagine you see all these giants. I didn't know where I was. I was thinking that in my mind, will somebody come and help me? Will someone come and help me?" And I was so scared. I was a little boy and they were in control of me.

Abandonment, examination and removal was all part of the admission process. This 1960 Government of Ontario PSA walks us through the admission process. A note that language used in this video is offensive, and does not reflect the language we use today.

[Audio from The Government of Ontario](#)

Each new patient is a complex individual puzzle, and must be thoroughly examined and tested before a training program can be planned for it. Roughly, the retarded fit into three categories:

1. Mildly retarded
2. Moderately
3. Severely retarded

IQ tests are used to help determine the degree of intelligence of the patients. Every detail about the patient is carefully noted. Each completed test and report is part of the whole picture.

IQ testing was used, along with adult guardianship, to segregate people in institutions in the name of care. To this day, people are put in harm's way due to IQ labeling.

These three categories mild, moderate and severe determined so much about lives lived in institutions. There are no good labels, each of these categories resulted in a specific type of harm. For people given mild labels were given access to education but also were forced to work without pay.

Shelley Fletcher: And you worked. Where did you work?

David Weremy: I worked in a laundry.

Shelley: In the laundry

Megan: That does not sound like it was a good job.

David: No.

Megan: Lots of heavy clothing

Shelley: Did you get paid?

David: 70 cents

Shelley: A day?

David: Every two weeks

Shelley: Every two weeks he got seventy cents

Donny MacLean : I was mowing lawns, and was getting \$30 for 75 hours. We were doing just as hard work as those getting paid minimum wage or more

The mild label was used to steal labour from people. There was no good label.

The “severe” label came with an unending sentence, [a sentence to the back wards](#). The Back Wards were where the worst abuses happened, because they were the most hidden. In many institutions, the policy was to abandon and neglect patients there, forcing people with disabilities to lay naked in their feces and urine for days. A severe label meant no hope, no possibility, and no exit. Many of the children and young people would live their entire lives in these institutions where they were subject to mental, physical, and sexual abuse. In some institutions, inmates were subject to medical testing, lobotomies, electrocution by cattle prod-like devices, torture, and sterilization.

Joe Clayton: Yeah you have to listen. There’s fear. A little boy at 13 or 12 and a half years old. You have the fear of the staffs. Every morning you get up at 7 o’clock in the morning and your bed is stripped. And you have to make it. And if you don’t make it, you’ll do it all day if you have to. And they’d throw a bucket of water if you don’t wake up in your bed. I was shock treated. They said they were going to give me a brain test, but it wasn’t a brain treatment. It was shock treatment.

They lied to Joe, subjected him to years of violence. Violence done under the auspice of care and treatment.

The label of intellectual/developmental disability has resulted in so much harm—mass confinement, forced sterilization, abuse, separate school systems, family separation, sub-minimum wage labour and isolation. And the label of developmental and intellectual disability was used as a weapon, used to confine many people that we have discriminated against— racialized people, Indigenous people, poor people, sex workers were all labelled with disabilities to justify their confinement. There were public campaigns that make people with disabilities appear to be monsters.

And those reasons, of the label as a weapon, that we use the language “people labeled with intellectual/developmental disabilities” because this label has been used to justify so much harm, not just to people with disabilities, but those who were assigned labels to rationalize the harm.

[Helena Reads] *Maybe you've never heard of institutions, never seen their remnants, or heard their stories. Invisibility is a risk. Invisibility is a danger.*

Invisibility means that we haven't learned from the past. We haven't. Today, government's continue to institutionalize people labeled with intellectual/developmental disabilities across this country, prevent them from making decisions about their daily lives, rationalize restraints and solitary confinement, and subject them to sub-minimum wage labour and poverty.

These places, these histories, these survivors, these truths need to be heard, they need to be known. Invisibility only serves those in power by making accountability and justice that much harder to pursue. People with disabilities and their allies have been working tirelessly for the last decades to bring these conversations to the light. In 1959 legendary Toronto Star Reporter, Pierre Berton, exposed these conditions...

Alex reading [Pierre Bertons](#):

But Orillia's real problem is one of public neglect. It is easier to appropriate funds for spectacular public projects such as highways and airports than for living space for tiny tots with clouded minds. Do not blame the present Department of Health for Orillia's condition. Blame yourself.

Well, you have been told about Orillia. In many respects it is an up-to-date institution with a dedicated staff fighting an uphill battle against despairing conditions. But should fire break out in one of those ancient buildings and dozens of small bodies be found next morning in the ashes, do not say that you did not know what it was like behind those plaster walls, or underneath those peeling wooden ceilings.

[Helena] *You have been told, you have been shown.*

Alex (rereading Orillia) Should a virus break out in one of those ancient buildings, and dozens of small bodies be found, do not say you did not know what it was like behind those plaster walls. Huge buildings filled with tiny bodies. I can't help but think of the institutions during COVID, where dozens of bodies were found, malnourished, neglected, left to die.

That was sixty years ago. In 1965, these institutions were exposed once more, this time by US Senator and later President Robert Kennedy.

[Robert Kennedy] we have a situation that borders on a snake pit, and that the children live in filth, that many of our fellow citizens are suffering tremendously because of lack of attention, lack of imagination, lack of adequate manpower.

There is very little future for these children, for those who are in these institutions. Both need a tremendous overhauling. I'm not saying that those who are the attendants there, or who run the institutions, are at fault – I think all of us are at fault and I think it's just

long overdue that something be done about it.” [for more on American institutions see: [Christmas in Purgatory](#)]

It’s been 60 years. And we still need a tremendous overhauling. Sixty years of self advocates, family members and allies demanding freedom, exposing terrible truths and fighting for a more just future for people with disabilities. That’s entire lifetimes.

[Megan](#): So I'm going to turn it over to Vicky Vicky is a Community member human rights Advocate and spokesperson for the disability rights Coalition of Nova Scotia for ten years Vicki has been forced to live in a long-term care institution because the government has failed to provide her with the resources to support her to safely live in community so I'm going to turn it over to Vicky now

[Vicky Levack](#): Thank you Megan, Thank you again everyone for coming here today, it means a lot to me to know that people are listening, because for approximately a decade umm well I shouldn’t say that because for the last 2 years or so they have been listening, but for the 8 years before that i felt that i was screaming into a void. Im very happy that people seem to be listening now.

Ten years ago, self advocates and survivors traveled across the prairies in an RV to get the word out, to make a documentary, [called the freedom tour](#), to expose the ongoing truths of institutionalization in Canada.

Footage from [the Freedom Tour](#)

News Anchor: a group that wants to see people with disabilities taken out of institutions is taking their message on the road

Self Advocates We leave tomorrow morning which is Saturday
let's get the message of let's free our people!
this is called we gotta close the institutions.

[Megan Narration]

Almost fifteen years later, during COVID-19, I found myself among this amazing network of people trying to get the word out, and demanding deinstitutionalization.

I’ve been writing, advocating, and researching disability and deinstitutionalization for a few years. But when COVID-19 started, I got impatient because while the Rideau Regional Centre is closed, hundreds of other institutions remain in operation, new names, same faces.

I did my Masters of Public Policy at Carleton University, and my research was supposed to be focused on sexuality policy in institutions for people labelled with intellectual/developmental disabilities in Ontario. But there was this huge problem, I couldn’t for the life of me figure out where people lived, what the institutions are. There are around 16,000 people in residential developmental services, but more than that, there are 20,000 people on the waitlist. So those

[20,000 people are displaced across a bunch of other places](#). Many live with family, and there's a but many live in lots of different institutions. So I started to make a big map, and it just got bigger.

And this whole time, right I am just trying to look at the bedrooms right! To see if any of these places had places where people could easily [masterbate, smooch on the bed, listen to a record with a lover](#), you know! But when COVID-19 started, other things became a lot more important, and these bedroom facts changed shape.

There were these two kinds of places that really weirded me out, made my stomach drop. I couldn't get basic facts, like how many people lived there, who owned them, where they were, who regulated them. It was weird! And I deeply felt like I was in the abyss, like none of the people I knew in the field knew about them, there were no articles, little media coverage, [no data](#).

One of them are called [domiciliary hostels](#). They didn't weird me out because of their strangely Victorian name but because they are for profit. Now, the province of Ontario kind of regulated them for a while until around 2008, so there was like 60 years where they are vaguely regulated there has been exactly [ONE SURVEY of them](#), which found that there were 4,700 people living there, and a third of them had a developmental disability. And let me get this straight, like 1-5% of the population has a developmental/intellectual disability So that is like A LOT in one place.

And around that time, other institutions in Ontario for people labelled with developmental disabilities closed. And then domiciliary hostels became municipal responsibilities, and those municipalities didn't really have to do *anything*. One thing they did do was change their names and grow and grow.

These places caught my attention for a few reasons: they are private and for profit, unlike the developmental services sector people make money off of this. Second, they are BIG. Like 20 people, 40 people, 60, 80, 120 people living together. [1950s bedrooms](#) filled with beds and only 1 accessible bathroom, communal food spaces. And third, is they have fucking horrifying shit about them everywhere. I was reading google reviews, left haunted.

Helena read



My uncle Russ passed away there. It should of never happened. The place is run down. When you eat in the dining room, you are surrounded by flies. It's even worse in the summer time. The living room lounges have dirty carpet stains, piss stains on chairs it's disgusting. They cleaned the bedrooms once every 2 weeks. They change the bed sheets and blankets and wash dirty floors with dirty water. They're were rooms with bed bugs infestations. Why would the city of Ottawa allow that?! I could go on and on. Please if you have a loved one and you are thinking of moving them there? Think twice. R.I.P Uncle Russ.



REPLY

★★★★★ 4 months ago

I used to live there and the following is what I personally saw and experienced. Black mold, rude staff, building is falling apart, your laundry comes back wet in a bag, and they really don't care about your well being.

 Like

So I started reading government reports and for [40 years they have been recommended to close down, because for one they are unregulated](#), because their unsafe, because they go against literally every best practice the government has ever written about custodial care and have an absurd amount of financial abuse, fires, rats, and the FOOD.

And during COVID, I got fucking stressed! There was no reporting, no public health reports and no data around what was happening there, access to vaccination. So, I started working with this really awesome project at Carleton University [COVID_19 Tracing Data project](#) at Carleton University. And every Sunday we would work for 5 hours, like 5-30 of us, collecting the data about these institutions. Tediously looking at every picture, every website, google maps, facebook page. And we got the data. Today, there are more than [8,000 people living in these institutions in Ontario](#). Just over ten years, they've grown by more and the lack of reporting, no data, no research, nothing.

One of the thing that made me the most furious, was the lack of reporting and the lack of interrogating this system of institutionalization. ([Nora Loreto does a good job, check out her coverage](#)) And health units didn't have to name them in their reporting, so there was like NO DATA on this issue, except for the ones I was collecting.

And that's why we're here, telling these stories. Because people with disabilities and their ongoing institutionalization is being invisibilized and we need a reckoning, like the one Pierre Berton demanded.

These experiences and resistance cannot continue to be ignored, underreported and disconnected from our past. 19,000 people with disabilities have been killed by COVID-19 in institutions. Invisibilized. I think about Pierre Berton's words once more.

Alex Reads [Pierre Berton](#)

But should fire break out in one of those ancient buildings and dozens of small bodies be found next morning in the ashes, do not say that you did not know what it was like behind those plaster walls, or underneath those peeling wooden ceilings.

We cannot say we did not know about the conditions of institutionalization that results in dozens of bodies found in the ashes of COVID-19. We cannot say we did not know what it was like beyond those walls. Why are people with disabilities still subject to institutionalization? Why haven't we learned from the past? Why? I think about Joe again.

[Joe] Why did this happen to me and so many Canadians.

I know the answer to these questions, but not enough of us do. You all need to as well. So that's why I am here. I thought we should start by driving an hour south on highway seven, to Smith Falls, to the regional centre in my friend's 2004 subaru.

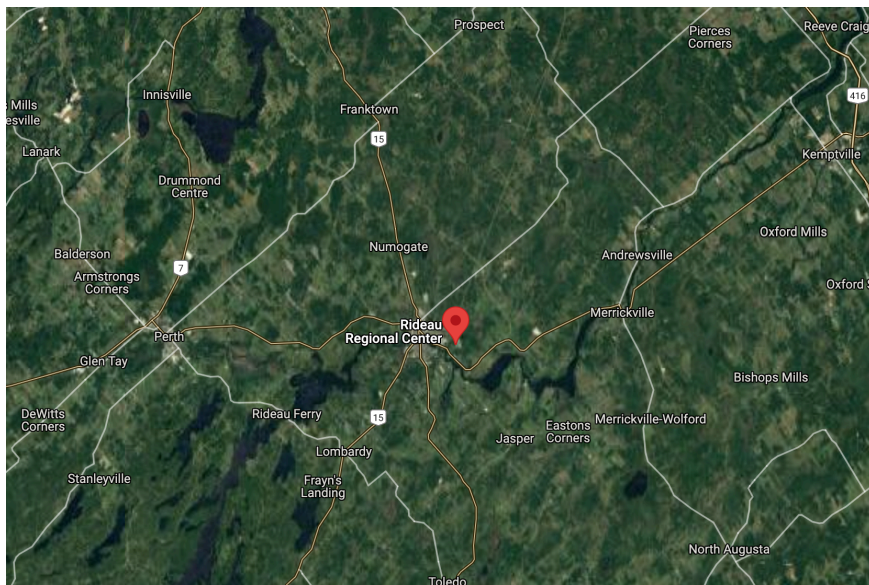
Helena : *What do you bring with you to a place you wish had never existed?*

[megan narration]

I packed a large vat of coffee, my favourite handkerchief, and a sunflower to lay down at the memorial.

I moved to Ottawa just a couple months before the pandemic, and I don't drive. So it is really the first time I am leaving the city limits. I pack my trusty anti-nausea medication and a large bottle of water. The sun is hot on the drive and I can't get over how lush and dense the trees are. I'm from the prairies, and I'm used to being able to see everything, the entire landscape.

The Rideau Regional Centre is on the outskirts of the town of Smith Falls, isolated from Ottawa, isolated from the rest of the town, if you look at the aerial view you can see just how isolated it is. The 350 acre property is surrounded only by acres and acres of dense forest. The geography another tool to invisibilize the institution, invisibilize the people it confined.



From Queen Street, we can't see much past the dense treeline at the front of the grounds. We turn left onto Rideau Regional Centre Drive. There are two giants signs, greeting us proclaiming "the galipeau center", beside it, a for-lease sign. The only trace of the history was the street sign at the intersection. It fades as we make our way down the long driveway. This road is the only way to get in or out of the grounds— a kilometer of concrete, you can see all the way down.

Megan: Ok, so we are driving on the grounds. *shutter sound* it is sunny and there are gigantic trees, there are gigantic trees everywhere.

Kit It seems pretty well maintained

Megan: It's shockingly well maintained. I did not anticipate this. Like everything, all the grass is very cut and mowed, which must be an extensive mowing process. We've been driving down Rideau Regional Centre Road for a long time now. Well I don't know.

It's at least a 15 minute walk down the kilometer down it. Driving down it, I think about the children labelled with intellectual disabilities who were driven down this driveway by parents who loved them, parents who were ashamed of them, parents they would never see again. Many, driven by Children's Aid Society workers, others, the Ontario Provincial Police. This drive was only the route to abandonment.

Joe Clayton: 00:29 I remember Rideau Regional Centre. When i went with my worker. We got out of the car. The buildings were tall, and they were straight and they all look like tombstones. I went into the admission ward with my worker. And he turned around and he said "good bye". And he left me.



Megan: So straight ahead, there is a theatre, reception hall, parrot partner, day to day massage therapy, pie-bird bakery and tea room, indoor winter golf school, apartments, hilton's unforgettable tales, the hub pool, one on one fitness, ok so they just have fully completely taken over the grounds. So somewhere on the grounds they have a memorial plaque, but I would not say that it is exceptionally... I am just completely shocked that all of these buildings have been taken over.

Kit: it's like an entire campus . Like if you didn't know the history of this you would just be like why does this exist?

Megan: Ya like they have completely repurposed every building.

Kit: Like there is obviously a history, for it to be in this sort of situation for it to be like this, but it isn't apparent what that history is in anyway.

[Megan narration] .

In 2011, the institutional property was sold to the Galipeau Centre. In that time some of the institution has been taken over, repurposed into commercial retail, venues, coffee shops.

VIA The Galipeau Centre: Nestled in the heart of the country-side but walking distance from downtown Smiths Falls, The Galipeau Centre is perfectly located, providing anything you need. With 800,000 square feet of available lease space and over 350 acres of land, the facility can accommodate almost anything!

350 acres of land, 800,000 square feet of lease space and no room for a memorial. The buildings that look like tombstones have been made into fitness studios, coffee shops, defaced by paintball studios. Their advertisements, promote:

[Helena] “Say, I do...at the Gallipeau Centre! Let us share in your special day, and set the stage for a lifetime of adventure! Our event spaces provide you with a blank canvas to allow the vision of your dream day to unfold!

The Centre is many things, but a blank canvas is probably the farthest from it. There isn’t an inch of this canvas that hasn’t been coloured by confinement, violence and resistance.

But invisibilizing this history cannot continue, invisibility is a danger that we can’t risk any longer.

My next guest has been working hard on this. Madeline Burghardt is a historian & professor, her book Broken is a complete social history of the Rideau Regional Centre and institutionalization in Ontario. One of the things that Dr. Burghardt does so well, is explaining that there’s not just one history, but many different one.

Dr. Burghardt: and I think what I think what's really important to understand if you think back to 1876 but you know the last institution in Ontario didn't close until 2009, not too long ago. In that 140 year span there were lots of time period./ institutions became even more popular. with a certain they maintain their popularity throughout that whole time sometimes for different reasons but the fundamental ideology underlying them remained. Which was that it was important to remove certain people from the population and segregated from the rest of society and huge places where

Dr. Burghardt: so-called care would be provided right and so an example of that is for example at the turn of the 20th century the late eighteen hundreds beginning of the 1900s, Eugenics movement was very strong in both Canada and United States and the Eugenics movement played a big role in keeping that institutional movement going, feeding institutions with large numbers of people because Eugenics was all about

Dr. Burghardt: removing people from the population who were seen as people who would contaminate the gene this was this was an effort to stop them from reproducing and stop them from having their own families of their own children. And institutions were a tool that would help in that process. Right they could take people out of the population and also lots of Institutions especially in Alberta and BC became locations of sterilization right where people,

[Megan Narration]

[Eugenics are a phony, racist pseudoscience](#). There's going to be a whole episode about eugenics, specifically in Alberta and BC later in the series. [Eugenics](#) were developed in 1883 by Galton he described eugenics as “

"the science of improving stock—not only by judicious mating, but whatever tends to give the more suitable races or strains of blood a better chance of prevailing over the less suitable than they otherwise would have had." ([Francis Galton, 1883](#))

So basically this is a scientific justification for white supremacy. by removing people labeled as less-suitable and preventing them, at all costs, from reproducing. In Ontario, this is what institution were used for to remove people labelled with intellectual and developmental disabilities from their community as early as possible in order to sexually segregate them and prevent them from having children, having partners , having families.

In Ontario, [Dr. Helen MacMurchy](#) was a prominent white supremacist, Eugenicist and Special Inspector of institutions for the feeble-minded. In her role, she fought for the institutionalization of children as young as possible, removing them from society before they became a “eugenic threat” (MacMurchy, 1915). And get this, to this day, MacMurchy is celebrated by both the provincial and federal government as a “women of nation in al historical significance”. ICK! During her reign, MacMurchy & the eugenics society was so committed to this removal of the children that they sought to test every single child in schools, orphanages, and CAS custody Eugenics practice meant that men and women were segregated apart from each other in cottages and schools and even in death.

Alex:“So keen were the officials that there be no possibility of sex or propagation by these deviants that upon death men and women were sometimes buried in separate burial grounds” ([Williston](#), 1971, p. 24).

But there were other eugenic tactics too— [David McKillop](#) was the lead plaintiff on the class action lawsuit filed against the Ontario Government as a survivor of the Rideau Regional Centre. While at Rideau, David was physically and mentally abused by staff members and other residents. At one point he was violently kicked in the groin by a staff member. David is married, but, as result of being so violently kicked, he is unable to have children.

Here's Dr. Burghardt again, explaining how eugenics policy was implemented.

Interview Madeline Burghardt: when primary education became public and mandatory, that interesting enough also increase the admissions to institutions because then children were in this public space but it could be monitored and assessed and during Eugenics period there was that big emphasis on identifying children who were seen as being feeble-minded and sending them off into institutions. So strangely free public education actually facilitated the growth of institutions.

It's important to put this in context...the most notorious [national context for eugenics](#) was that of Nazi Germany. Under the banner of "racial hygiene"—policies that resulted in the forced sterilization and mass murder of more than 6 million Jewish people, and more than 5 million people deemed “inferior”, particularly Romani people, queer people and disabled people . At least 300,000 of whom were killed in institutions, targeted specifically because of their disability. See: Stahnisch, F. (2014, October 29). Racial hygiene and Nazism. Retrieved February 22, 2022, from <https://eugenicsarchive.ca/database/documents/545134d251854fef65000001>

And even though Canada fought against Nazis, there are a lot of connections between Nazi Germany, and North American eugenics—for instance personal relationships between eugenicists, sharing of eugenic ideas and practices, as well as a great interest in the activities on each side of the Atlantic continued all along the high time of European and North American eugenics. Another important connection is Hitler's admiration of [Canada's Residential School System](#), the genocidal assimilationist boarding schools that confined 150,000 Indigenous children and killed at least [6,000 children](#). In these federally mandated institutions, children were stolen from their communities, forbidden from speaking their languages, practicing their culture and forced to endure abuse, medical experimentation and, fatal conditions. And while eugenic ideas really connect these places, it's important to [recognize their differences](#).

Assimilationist boarding schools were [federally mandated](#) which meant that there were entire communities, towns, cities without children, residential schools were an important part of broader policies that enacted violence and harms — many which meet the [legal definition of genocide](#).

Eugenic ideology and its ties with nazism surely obviously didn't end institutionalization, or the use of eugenic policy in Canada. In fact the institutions were continuing to grow in population after World War 2. Here's Dr. Burghardt against

Dr. Burghardt And there were other times where this became popularized as well. Such as for example, after the Second World War there were a lot of families who were hoping to have their children admitted to institutions. A lot of that had to do with stigma at the time around disability, particularly intellectual disability. Families trying to establish themselves in the post-war climate. Building strong nuclear families, and a child with a disability didn't really help with that image right? SO just to say this popularity was maintained over the years for different reasons but the fundamental ideology remains the same.

The fundamental ideology remains the same. This belief that people with disabilities should be congregated at the lowest cost possible. Now it's important to note this ideology is rooted in [ableism](#), the system that places value on people's bodies and minds based on constructed ideas of normality, intelligence, excellence, desirability, and productivity. That's the why Joe was asking about. That's the why we haven't addressed.

Institutions were a tool for the government to spend as little money. To do so, costs were cut on every corner. [Paid staff were replaced by unpaid inmates](#), who were responsible for producing, preparing and distributing the food to the more than 2,000 people. The institutions were overcrowded, and the population only growing.

Here's Dr. Burghardt again...

Dr. Burghardt: another sort of overriding feature of Institutions was there size. The institutions that I focus on mostly in my work were the really big institutions, the big government run institutions in Ontario. There were three really large ones. There was Huronia Regional Centre near Orillia, and there was the Cedar Springs institution in the southwest corner of the province and then there was the Rideau Regional Centre near Ottawa. But those are the three big main ones. And those three were really huge, like they could fit thousands of residents in them. They could. Rideau was originally designed to house 3, 000 people. I don't think it ever actually reached that maximum capacity, but certainly the idea was that you could fit a small town, the size of a small town inside these complexes. And they really were complexes, there were main buildings and there were you know, off buildings that they called cottages. Which if you've ever gone to the Huronia site, you know that these cottages were huge. They were not cottages. They're just smaller buildings than the main one.

as I am sure your aware, all the buildings were connected by hallways the idea being this is a modern building so people don't have to go outside in the winter. Which just meant hallways that were super super long. So these were huge buildings and the reason it's important to think about that is because it's the bigger the facility, the harder it is to respect any of the needs or desires of the individual.

The long hallways remind me of the long driveway we had to take. The long hallways remind of darkness. These secluded areas, "between doors" or "cross hall" were used to [hide abuses](#). The design of this entire institution is to confine. The design of the institution is to hide people, hide abuse, hide criminal conditions. I feel claustrophobic in the 800,000 square feet of institution.

Megan

Okay, so we're finally back in the car are because I'm tired. And it was really weird walking around from where we were in the car, because where we walk up to now,

everything is like in order, doesn't look like if you crept through any of the windows, you would find 20 mattresses stacked together or shattered glass. Like there's hanging pots with flowers, some beautiful red flowers and like brand new sunrooms because these are at here buildings. And I think that it's nice to be sitting down again because it was just like, for me, it just felt so overwhelming to be surrounded by it. And we still are, but we are in the back before. And it was literally only building and only disrepair and only, I don't know. But now there's, we're near the Tai Chi academy and the theater and these apartments. How are you doing kit?

Kit

I'm doing okay. I'm feeling like you were with being surrounded by like what places that just seem like haunted houses, like, and they just keep going. You go into one a courtyard and it's just all empty and like trying to peek in the windows and looking through and seeing what's in there and what strange things have been collected in the rooms. And then you go in, you're like, oh, we'll go on to the next spot. And it's just the same thing over and over again. And like the buildings are all shaped the same. So yeah, it just kind of feels endless. So we didn't make it all the way through. We turned around cuz it was just a lot.

Megan Narration

And even though the grounds of the institution are huge. They still were so crowded. Here's a Patricia Seth, she's a survivor of the Huronia Regional Centre, she was one of the lead plaintiffs in the Huronia Regional Centre class action lawsuit. Patricia uses storytelling, advocacy and education to raise awareness about the violence of institutions. Her audio documentary, [Gristle in the Stew](#) on CBC is fantastic!

Patricia Seth: "It was like living in jail. They called it cottages to fool the people that it was a wonderful place to live in. They don't have a picture that you're locked in, that you're counted before your meals, counted before your medicine. (Audio footage through [truths of institutionalization, Group Control](#))"

[Megan narrative]

That experience of control was really important and so many other survivors share that experience of being removed of their autonomy, individuality and personhood, in order to become a number.

Even in death, people were removed from their personhood. The Huronia Regional Centre was the only institution in Ontario with a cemetery, a mass grave on its grounds. [Until 1958, the markers](#) bore only a number, the order that inmates died in. Hiding any information about the person buried beneath them.

In large, institutional settings, people are stripped of so many aspects of their identity Here's Liz, sharing about how this impacted her.

Liz: "I wish I had fun going out shopping, everything like that, all that fun stuff. And i couldn't do that. You couldn't have anything. That made me feel sad, and feel like you were nothing. We couldn't have our own clothes, some clothes are somebody else's clothes. I could do my hair and I can do my own stuff. I didn't feel beautiful in the institution. I didn't feel nothing." (Audio footage from Truths of Institutionalization M2.V2)

[megan narration]

Watching archival [footage of the institutions](#), all the children are dressed the same, in matching striped jumpers, matching collared shirts, matching dresses. Shoes, clothes and linen were chosen and made in the institution, and still they were rarely the right size. Dorm rooms were locked day and night. The washrooms had no doors, the showers no dividers. Here's Pierre Berton's description:

Alex Reads [Pierre Berton](#)

On one floor there is one wash basin to serve 64 persons. On another floor, where the patients sometimes must be bathed twice or three times a day, there is one bathtub for 144 persons — together with three shower outlets and eight toilets. Prisoners in reformatories have better facilities.

[Megan Narration]

Hundreds of thousands of square feet and not enough space for a fucking bath tub. I think about institutions that still run today, institutions that only have one bathroom for 80, 100 residents. I think once more about the long-term care institutions, where there weren't enough workers to shower residents. Where residents were forced to sit in their urine and feces for days.

Shoshana Forester: We weren't allowed to leave our rooms, except to go to the shower room for a shower once a week. We weren't allowed to use any of the common areas in the facility, so the cafeteria, the worship centre, the courtyard, the library, umm.. Going outside. None of that stuff was allowed.

Institutions are designed not for the people living there, but for the staff managing them. Large institutions serve only to further that fundamental ideology — that people with

disabilities should be isolated and congregated at the lowest cost possible. And that belief, that mission, that plan, forces people with disabilities [into vulnerable positions](#)-- that's another thing about the size of the institution.

[Burghardt interview] But the other crucial thing about the size. bigger place also hides when abuse happens. It's much easier for abuse, whether it's verbal harassment or physical or sexual abuse, it's much easier for that to happen in a place that's really big. There's more places to hide, there are more ways to cover it up, so that's another really important thing to note. The bigger the place, the easier it is for harm to happen. And that was true of what was all that happened in all those places all of the survivors i spoke with. And i spoke with people who lived in all three of those large institutions, all of them either witnessed or experienced abuse. And it was consistent. And so, there's a connection there, there's evidence that such a huge structure can, can hide and cover up these these instances have really severe and tragic harm.

There is so much severe and tragic harm that happened in these places of incarceration. It makes me deeply sad, but more than that, it makes me furious that we still have not learned. **I think once more about the long hallways. The dark corners. The hiding places. I think about the story of [Jean Leach](#),** a Franco-Ontarian woman. At ten, she was abandoned by the Children's Aid Society in the Regional Centre. Growing up there she had friends, birthday cake, but she didn't have access to French education. She worked in the laundry for pennies an hour, one day at work she was raped by a paid worker. She got pregnant. When she was pregnant, she was routinely given cold packs, where I was put in a nightgown, wrapped in sheets, placed on ice and dumped with cold water. Many residents were subject to torture in the name of treatment. After giving birth she was told that the baby was stillborn. She never got to see, meet, name or even bury her child. See: [The Reclamation Project](#)

Years later, she was taken to the cemetery, with so many graves of babies of the RRC, marked only with [iron bar crosses, no names](#).

They hid the names, hid the burials, hid the memorial, hell, they managed to hide an 350 acres institution and disguise it as a mall. They are so set on hiding things.

But survivors have worked for decades on sharing their stories of incarceration. Remember Every Name [Remember Every Name](#) is a group led by survivors of the Huronia Regional Centre that was open in Orillia from 1876 - 2009, and the site of horrific abuse.

It rests on stolen, ancestral lands of the Iroquaian and Algonquin speaking peoples, the traditional lands of the Huron-Wendat (Wyandot) & the Petun, and the ceded land of the Anishinaabe.

[Remember Every Name](#) is “committed to making sure that people, locally and nationally, remember the brutal and recent history of eugenics and abuse that took place on the site. They have been committed to properly memorializing people who died in the institution. They worked to expose the removal of gravestones, and the installation of a septic tank through the cemetery that holds at least 1,379 people who died at the HRC are confirmed to have been buried in the institution cemetery. however due to poor record keeping and the removal of many grave markers, the exact number is unknown and the government erected a monument in the 1990s, which says it could be more than 2,000.”

They built their OWN memorial, one that honoured the people buried there. It reads:

Reading of

[If These Walls Could Talk/](#)

Crows have long memories and remind us we are not alone in caring for this place and the people buried here. They call out and encourage us to speak and demand the truth.

As survivors we call on our communities to listen and learn from our experiences, so history will not repeat itself. Butterflies represent the freedom and achievements of survivors lives outside the institution. Forget-me-nots signify our commitment to remembering what must never be forgotten.

This monument serves as a testament - to the pain and hope of people who are now free but who can never forget; and to the dream and struggle to end all institutions where people are not free. Hear the chorus of our hearts. Honour every death, remember every name, cherish every life.

Dedicated August 24th, 2019 to all those who survived living at Huronia Regional Centre and to those whose lives ended here. May peace be with them.

After 60 years of advocacy, after 60 years of survivors, allies and families building coalitions. After 40 years after the first government commission demanded closure, Rideau, Huronia and the Southwest Regional Centre finally closed in 2009, four years later in 2013 the government settled the class action with survivors, in 2014 the government issued an apology and placed memorials without consultation of survivors.

Kathlynn Wynne: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WUMUyLKbHJg>

Good afternoon, everyone. It is not lost on me that this afternoon we are doing two very connected things. We are—I am—here to speak truth about a painful chapter in our history and to seek reconciliation with all of those who have been harmed. We will then pay tribute to a man who embodied the power of truth and reconciliation, so I draw on that strength as I offer this apology.

A government's responsibility is to care for its people and to make sure they are protected and safe, and therein lies a basic trust between the state and the people. It is on that foundation of trust that everything else is built: our sense of self, our sense of community, our sense of purpose. When that trust is broken with any one of us, we all lose something; we are all diminished.

I want to address a matter of trust before this House and my assembled colleagues, but I am truly speaking to a group of people who have joined us this afternoon and to the many others who could not be here today. I am humbled to welcome to the Legislature today former residents of the Huronia Regional Centre; and the Rideau Regional Centre, in Smiths Falls; and also to address former residents of the Southwestern Regional Centre, near Chatham, along with their families and supporters. I want to welcome all of you, I want to honour your determination and your courage, and I want to thank you for being here to bear witness to this occasion.

Today we take responsibility for the suffering of these people and their families.

I offer an apology to the men, women and children of Ontario who were failed by a model of institutional care for people with developmental disabilities. We must look in the eyes of those who have been affected and those they leave behind and say we are sorry.

As Premier and on behalf of all the people of Ontario, I am sorry for your pain, for your losses and for the impact these experiences must have had on your faith in this province and in your government. I am sorry for what you and your loved ones experienced and for the pain that you carry to this day.

In the case of Huronia, some residents suffered neglect and abuse within the very system that was meant to provide them care

We broke faith with them and with you, and by doing so, we diminished ourselves. Over a period of generations and under various governments, too many of these men, women and children and their families were deeply harmed, and they continue to bear the scars and the consequences of this time. Their humanity was undermined. They were separated from their families and robbed of their potential, their comfort, their safety and their dignity. At Huronia, some of these residents were forcibly restrained, left in unbearable seclusion, exploited for their labour and crowded into unsanitary conditions. While the model of care carried out by this institution is now acknowledged to have been deeply flawed, there were also cases of unchecked physical and emotional abuse by some staff and residents.

Huronia was closed in 2009, when Ontario closed the doors to its last remaining provincial institutions for people with developmental disabilities. Today, Mr. Speaker, we no longer see people with developmental disabilities as something other; they are boys and girls, men and women with hopes and dreams, like everyone else. In Ontario, all individuals deserve our support, our respect and our care. We must look out for one another, take care of one another and challenge ourselves to be led by our sense of moral purpose before all else.

Today, we strive to support people with developmental disabilities so they can live as independently as possible and be more fully included in all aspects of their community. As a society, we seek to learn from the mistakes of the past, and that process continues.

I know, Mr. Speaker, that we have more to do, so we will protect the memory of all those who have suffered, help to tell their stories, and ensure that the lessons of this time are not lost.

We are so sorry.

But even as the institutions closed, even as the apologies were made, many people labelled with intellectual disabilities were just shuffled into other institutions. Truth is, Institutions are like hydras: as one head is cut off, two more emerge. Yet, as we have seen since the beginning of the pandemic, this fight is far from over.

The one I am looking at is a domiciliary hostel, a private-for-profit institution for people with disabilities vaguely regulated by municipalities. The shardon manor is one of them. It's a 2 minute drive to the institution. ([check out this awesome reporting by Simon Gardner](#))

And so now we're looking at Chardon Manor and there's a gigantic hole attached to it. And on the second floor, there's a door that just opened into the pit. So that seems super safe. I mean there must be building a new facility. That's a basement. Yeah. So they just got a grant to expand. Okay. Yeah. That's exactly. But right now they still only have one bathroom. Seriously. So that's cool. Okay. This is us getting outta the car.

I think once more to Joe. He asked **why**?

These new (or old) forms of institutionalization will continue cropping up as long as we live in an ableist society whose primary response to disability is confinement. The government's desire to invisibilize these institutions will never allow for the freedom of people with disabilities.

We're on a mission to change that, join us.

Script - End Credits

reusable session: Megan group-homes-1 #3

(bara music underneath)

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