

OUT FROM UNDER: Disability, History and Things to Remember

Contributors

Terry Poirier: Digging

I feel I have a unique insider perspective to the deplorable treatment many persons with disabilities have received. This comes from the many years I have worked in institutional settings. One of these settings was a large congregate care facility, a required practicum site for my college diploma. But I have also worked in institutional settings within the community—in group homes, in the education system and within various community agencies. The idea of a shovel as both a tool and a symbol came to me quickly. I had seen it used in many ways. As a tool the shovel has a practical side. In disability history the shovel has been used to bury disabled people during epidemics and plagues and during the Nazi's T4 euthanasia program. Shovels have also been used as “tools” to perform labour justified as “therapy”. I have seen “work gangs” digging holes in the ground in the morning only to fill them in during the afternoon, all in the name of vocational programming. I have also seen shovels in protected glass casings, having broken new ground to build the next segregated workshop. But shovels are also a symbol of hope if they are equipped with the necessary design features. They can make possible the various delights that come with having a home of your own: like shovelling the snow after a winter storm and planting a garden in the spring.

Terry Poirier is an Autism Consultant with the ErinoakKids Central West School Support Program. He is presently pursuing a Graduate Degree in Adult Education. But it was during his years as a front line residential counsellor in institutions and group homes that he bore witness to the object of his display. He drew on this direct practical experience and new disability studies theory to trace the evolution of the shovel and what it can unearth.

Ruth Ruth Stackhouse: Labouring

On August 11th 1993 I tied myself to the sign post at the front door of the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (formerly the Toronto Hospital for the Insane), 999 Queen Street West. A group of us, psychiatric survivors and activists, had gathered together to protest the brutality often committed in the name of psychiatry. Fourteen years later, I'm still demanding that attention be paid to the unjust treatment that occurs within institutional walls, both past and present. I am a Disability Studies student and community theatre director at the Friendly Spike Theatre Band, a playhouse that is made up of psychiatric survivors and people with disabilities.

I wanted to explore the history of labour exploitation that three women psychiatric patients at the then-Toronto Hospital for the Insane suffered through, because it was something that spoke to me. It spoke of dominance: of the power of medicine, patriarchy, and total institutions. But it also spoke to me of resistance: of women resisting the “norms” of misogyny, social exploitation, and gender submission. It also spoke to me of community: of women working to build a sense of purpose and a life of substance even in the abject environment of an asylum. I felt really connected to these women in their struggles to find meaning in work, something that psychiatric survivors are often excluded from. I also felt that it was important to recognize that they were exploited by not being paid for work just because they were labelled by psychiatry.

Ruth Ruth Stackhouse is a proud member of the psychiatric survivor community. She studied theatre in New York City and is currently Theatre Director of the Friendly Spike Theatre Band. A long-standing activist, she has protested against institutional confinement and the exploitation of patient labour. That passion drives her installation.

Phaedra Livingstone: Naming

As a museum researcher I look at how people are represented through objects and texts. We only learn a small amount about other people, places and times through any visit to an exhibit. But what can the objects on display help us to know or feel? When looking at a photograph collection that documents a public education exhibit produced by the Canadian National Committee for Mental Hygiene in 1924, one of the questions I asked was: How might these photographs be used today in an educational programme to address our history of discrimination against disability? The poster in this display is from that collection. Another concern I grappled with was the need for anonymity in patient photos. Informed consent was not a standard of care in 1924; now it is a very important right. The photograph in the blue frame is of a nameless girl. My “black box” treatment of her eyes acknowledges her anonymity and privacy. The mirror allows us to inject our humanity into her image, and hopefully, to empathise with her.

Phaedra Livingstone is a museum researcher who is keenly interested in how people are represented and understood by others through texts and objects. She has extensive experience developing and delivering museum based education, and has conducted a range of studies on the development of and visitor response to exhibitions.

Sandra Phillips: Dressing

Clothing interests me. So do rights. I worked in an institution in the 1970s. I was appalled when I noticed that an article of clothing would be worn by one person one day, then when it came back from the laundry would be worn by somebody else. I also noticed that there were “stores” in the basement of an institution which stocked items of new clothing for individuals to take with them if they ever moved out. I moved on from an institutional job to community agencies that promote citizenship. But the memory that has stayed with me so powerfully is that of the singlemost prevalent institutional “outfit”—the ill-fitting, nondescript, grey sweat suit. In choosing this “object” I was struck by how the sweat suit—devoid of any labels, markers or designer logos—represented the monotony and routines of institutional life. And how having no choice over “what to wear today”, was a larger statement about what sense the residents had of their anonymity and powerlessness.

Her memories of the time in which she worked ‘inside’ one of Ontario’s sixteen institutions stirred Sandra Phillips to feature 16 identical sweat suits, because as she recalled, everyone wore the same thing. Now, a leader with the North Hastings Community Integration Association her resolve is strong to promote citizenship, social inclusion – and choice.

Carrie Fyfe: Measuring

The object from which I start my exploration into disability history is the Stanford-Binet testing kit from the 1960s. Many children from diverse backgrounds have been subjected to this particular IQ test. As an educator, I am interested in any test that is used to label and stigmatize children. As an equal rights advocate for persons with disabilities, I am disturbed at how this test has been used against those who fail to meet this arbitrary standard. Through my exhibit, I wanted to bring to light the connection between IQ tests and the eugenics movement, and the impact that these tests have had on disability history. In the past those who had a low score on an IQ test were often institutionalized or sterilized. The Eugenics movement in Canada wanted to purify the human race by eliminating or sterilizing any human beings that they deemed “unfit.” The Stanford-Binet test was one tool that they used in order to determine whether a child should be free to live in the world and reproduce. Today, standardized tests are still administered to children through school boards across Canada. While they are now framed as tests that are in place to ensure that children receive the help and attention in class that they require, we can draw on the past to remind us that “good intentions” can sometimes hurt and hinder children more than help. I feel fortunate to be a part of this exhibit. I believe that it provides a place to honour a history that is too often ignored, and to educate people through our research so that the history of disability oppression won’t reoccur.

Carrie Fyfe is a teaching assistant with the Peel Board of Education. Being an educator, she is aware of the many devices that have been used over the years to compartmentalize children and place them in categories. By exhibiting this object she is remembering those whose lives have been shaped by the results, while at the same time challenging us all to consider: who has the right to decide an individual's potential? Can a person's worth be measured with a test score?

Ryan Hutchins: Fixing

I am in the first year of the Disability Studies program at Ryerson and I consider myself a student not an artist. Creating an installation for this exhibit was something I had never done before. Where would I go to search for an "object"? One of the first places I went was to eBay. I am perfectly comfortable on eBay; I would even say I am a member of the eBay Community. I am often there shopping for old toys that remind me of my childhood. But it was pure luck that connected me to this piece. One day I spotted the 1948 Shriner's Program and I knew it would be perfect. I placed a bid on it and for \$30.00 it was mine! My only worry was whether it would arrive from Montreal before the course began. The circus picture on the cover is inviting. It almost shouts an invitation to grab the attention of small children. Once inside the story is quite different. I was struck by how the inside pictures featured institutional life and how the "crippled kiddies" seemed to be used as calculated pleas to evoke pity for charitable fundraising. I was intrigued by the opportunity to study this historic souvenir program and see what stories might emerge as I compared the differences and similarities in disability stereotypes, images and language between 1948 and today.

Ryan Hutchins supports young people and adults through her work with Community Living Toronto. She is sentimental about old childhood toys so it was sheer serendipity that a circus would be her entry to disability history. A natural on eBay, she bid on a souvenir program from the 1948 Shriner's Circus in Montreal. Clowns, balloons, and popcorn suggest a circus is coming to town, but as Ryan's installation reveals, once inside the tent, another story emerges.

Sarah May Glyn-Williams: Packing

I am a Disability Studies student at Ryerson University. I have my Developmental Service Worker diploma and work for the Toronto Board of Education as an educational assistant—working with medically fragile, developmentally disabled children. I am 27 years old and a mother of a three year old son. Just around the time that I was trying to uncover an object for my course, I received an email asking me to sign a petition to stop the closing of a local institution. Curious why anyone would want to keep an institution open, I started talking to

people, including former residents and employees of the site. Through my various contacts, I received an old trunk that had been used to pack the belongings of a former resident of the Orillia Asylum for Idiots. The trunk evoked so many feelings in me. I began to imagine how many lives had been packed away into that trunk: of hidden children, family secrets, and disability shame. I never thought that I would be so full of emotion over an empty chest. To me, this chest represents abandonment and the journey that those deemed not good enough for normal society were often forced to take. People that were packed away and had their lids closed down on them. I want my exhibit to lift the lid on this rarely talked about journey of the trunk.

An educational assistant with the Toronto Board of Education, Sarah May happened on a trunk that was used to send a child away, a child only slightly older than her own son. Overwhelmed and curious about the secrets and shame that lay within, she began her own journey to investigate another chapter of disability's hidden history.

Audrey King: Breathing

I first met Rev. Essex, a Baptist Minister, when I was a teen and living in Ottawa. He flew in from Toronto to fix my respirator, an “embarrassment” I used at night in order to breathe—and hated in my adolescent struggle to be “normal”. Tall and taciturn, he got straight to the job at hand, knowing that a commercial or armed forces jet was waiting to fly him back. When the job was done he talked— about others living in the community and always about his daughter— her interests, her work, her ambitions, her engagement to be married. I listened politely but wanted him to be gone before the neighbours found out. I was a child and had no idea of the scope and breadth and importance of his work at the time. Only years later, after decades of education, career and advocacy initiatives for all disabled Ontarians did I realize the humble yet profound significance of Reverend Essex's work. The “embarrassment” was not the assistive device which in reality liberates and frees a person. It was—and still is—the bureaucracies and support system inadequacies that confine people and rob them of freedom and choice.

Audrey King is a disability activist, a published author and illustrator, well known for “There's Lint in your Bellybutton! A Disabled Fable”. She was the Community Liaison Coordinator at the Hugh Macmillan Rehabilitation Centre. Audrey has long been in the vanguard addressing the concerns of disabled people.

Karen Yoshida: Breathing

I first met Rev. Essex's daughter, Sheila, when interviewing her for a research study. She described her "terrifying institutionalized life" following polio during the 1950's and her "break" from an inevitable institutional future, due to her father's boldness in taking her home against medical advice. That Reverend Essex learned how to repair her essential respiratory equipment enabled Sheila and others to breathe with security in their own homes. Fifty years ago living with respiratory paralysis in the community was considered reckless and irresponsible. The advent of the cuirass, a father's maverick determination, his skilful ingenuity and spirit of volunteerism seemed a perfect example of early Canadian disability activism for he epitomized defiance of the conventional practices of the time. Through this work I have come to recognize how today's Independent Living Movement and its origins during the 1970's were actually built upon unrecognized histories such as this. I am intrigued to explore what other enclaves of early activism may have existed beyond and prior to what we now know.

Karen Yoshida is an Associate Professor and disability studies scholar who teaches in the Department of Physical Therapy at the University of Toronto. Her research and teaching has emphasized the lived experience of disability and community partnerships. Researching from this object, she has become even more curious about how early post-polio disability activism - a hidden history that has yet to be excavated – may have prepared the soil for the Independent Living Movement as we know it in Canada.

Cindy Mitchell: Remembering

At the heart and centre of my installation is my daughter Kristen's death certificate. Kristen died in 1981 at the Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto as a result of a deliberate drug overdose. Her homicide was one of many infant deaths that resulted in The Royal Commission Inquiry into the deaths of 36 children at the Hospital. Kristen's death certificate became my starting point into exploring how even in death a person can become an activist. This certificate represents a dark period in my life that is filled with pain, questions, confusion and anger! My life course has forever been altered due to the death of my daughter, and together through this exhibit we are collectively expressing loss and resisting the notion that there is no room for human difference in society. I want my exhibit to remind people of the tens of thousands of murders of sick, disabled or different people whose deaths have been justified simply because they strayed outside of "the norm" and are viewed as objects of pity or a burden to their family and/or society. I want to remember the babies at Christopher Robin Institution, to remember Tracy Latimer, to remember Ryan Wilkieson, and to uncover the history of these deaths within the disability movement. I want to show how devaluing disability affects us all, and the harm and death that can result from such attitudes.

Cindy Mitchell's daughter Kristen Anne Inwood died from a deliberate digoxin overdose at the Hospital for Sick Children in March 1981. Her loss has been a starting point to support other families. As a Facilitator for the Durham Association for Family Respite Services she is well situated to build activist networks for mutual support and advocacy and to speak to the devaluation of disabled people. She declares that, in death and in life, her deepest learning and most precious gifts have come from her four children.

Kim Wrigley-Archer: Trailblazing

In 1998, I was invited to be on the board of directors for an apartment building designed for independent Deaf-Blind adults. A founding member of this organization, Joan Mactavish, was also on the board when I joined. In 2000, she published a book titled *Bravo, Miss Brown*. It was the story of a deaf-blind Canadian woman named Mae Brown who had refused to settle for anything less than the same rights and privileges accorded to nondisabled people, including self-determination. Joan had worked with her for many years. I bought a copy of the book. As a woman who acquired the dual disability of hearing and vision loss, I was struck by the similarities and contrasts between Mae's life and my own. I was moved by the similar experiences of exclusion we shared with all deaf-blind persons. When the opportunity arose to work on this exhibit, I thought of Mae right away, and about how involved Joan was in keeping Mae's memory alive. I, too, wanted Canadians to know about our very own Mae Brown, and her advocacy efforts for deaf-blind persons. In the course of this project, I interviewed Joan for a whole afternoon at her apartment. It was a fantastic, absorbing experience to listen to her talk about Mae and their experiences together. Near the end of the interview, Joan took Mae's Braille watch off her wrist. She told me that I could use this cherished memento to help tell Mae's story. That really moved me! I knew how much this meant to Joan and the immensity of trust she was placing in me. So, thank you, Joan. And *Bravo, Miss Brown*.

A tireless advocate with direct disability knowledge, Kim Wrigley-Archer has worked at many fronts: from promoting diversity in the workplace to serving on community boards to assisting her local municipality to comply with the provincial Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (2005). In this exhibit she moves from the political to the personal, surfacing the life of a foremother, Mae Brown.

Christine Brown: Struggling

Disability activism is everywhere in trade union and labour history, but like so much disability history, it is not always recognized for what it is. When we think of disability activism we think of activism on a shoestring budget—little infrastructure and even less stability. Yet there is another strand of disability activism—one represented by large institutions such as trade

unions. The difference is not merely one of resources but of approach, outlook and, of course, history. In the earliest days of labour organizing, health and safety together with the plight of injured workers were focal points for disability activism at work. And they remain so to this day. But what about people who cannot get through the workplace door—literally and metaphorically—in the first place? Access—getting inside and staying inside—is another focal point for disability activism at work. Access to hiring and promotion, access to the worksites themselves and to suitable equipment, access to environments that are safe and harassment free—are the daily realities of shop floor activism, grievance meetings and collective bargaining. The poster at the centre of this installation speaks to the issue of making the house of labour itself accessible.

Drawing on her trade union experience, including her current work at the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario, Christine Brown pins the intersection between labour activism and the disability rights movement squarely on the workplace bulletin board. It is there that the day-to-day struggles - health and safety, hiring and promotion, accessibility in the workplace - manifest themselves. Common space is always contested terrain.

Jihan Abbas: Leading

I was drawn to the disability history course because of my former work position at Canadian Association of Independent Living Centres (CAILC), their wish to be involved in this project, as well as my own interests in disability issues. Months before, I had come across this picture of Allan Simpson in a bankers' box in CAILC's storage room, and was immediately drawn to it. When the Ryerson course was announced, I knew this picture was the perfect object to work with. Allan Simpson was instrumental in the founding of CAILC, and actively involved in the disability community and activism in Canada. For me, this picture captures Allan Simpson as protestor, which I found to be quite unique. The images I was more familiar with through my location within a disability organization were usually more "cooperative" in nature (i.e. the signing of agreements etc.). One of a series of pictures taken that day, this picture serves as an important counterbalance to the "polite imagery" that usually dominates representations of both disability organizations and individuals.

Jihan Abbas conceived her installation while writing and analyzing social policy for the Canadian Association of Independent Living Centres (CAILC). A disability studies scholar, her diverse interests include life with disabled siblings, and disability arts and culture. Jihan's doctoral work will examine how institutional regimes govern the organization of residents' work.

Jim Derksen: Aspiring

Privileged by my disability experience since the 1953 polio epidemic, I have been a worker and a leader among the movement of persons with all disabilities to advance public recognition of our human rights and to represent ourselves in public policy. In 1992, recognising my association with the Canadian Disability Rights Council, the Secretary of State, the Honourable Robert de Cotret, asked Gerry MacDonald (then of Ottawa, now of P.E.I.) to present me with the Canadian flag that had flown on the Peace Tower over Parliament on the day that Bill-C78 had been passed into law. The Legislation was less than we had hoped for, and we were busy with a dozen new issues and campaigns. The flag was soon stored and largely forgotten on a shelf in my closet, where—but for several residential relocations, it remained until 2007. When I saw it again, I couldn't help but think about the interplay and relationship between symbolic and substantive change; between what is done and what is said. If looked at from the perspective of needing to see substantial change now, this Peace Tower flag may appear as mere “window dressing,” or perhaps as a flag draped over a coffin holding the dead remnants of our hopes. Does a longer broader view show this flag marking a cultural shift toward the more receptive social and political climate we need to underpin and support substantive reform over time?

In the history of disability activism in Canada, Jim Derksen is a true Renaissance man. He was part of many progressive initiatives: a member of the Company of Young Canadians, a central figure in the Manitoba League of Persons with Disabilities, and an activist in Disabled People's International. He has ridden every wave that led to enshrining disability rights in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. But like other national symbols, ongoing vigilance is crucial to ensure that Charter protections are actual, and not merely symbolic.