

## Woodlands School survivors watch as building demolished

Tamsyn Burgmann , *The Canadian Press*

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### **Richard McDonald never had his teeth yanked without anaesthetic or got electroshock therapy like some of his playmates suffered when they were growing up.**

His worst memory of the New Westminster, B.C. mental hospital where he lived for ten years, starting at age nine, was being put in isolation for more than three months because he was sick with measles, chicken pox and the flu.

The 68-year-old put that all behind him Tuesday with a simple three-two-one countdown that signalled construction crews to move in and knock down the last remaining tower of the 133-year-old Woodlands School.

"The only way everybody can be free is for that building behind us to come down," McDonald said in an interview as men in hard hats and vests pried open the boarded up entranceway just moments before advancing with heavy equipment.

"We want to live in the future, we don't want to live in the past. With it gone, the people will say, 'Now we can live in peace.'"

Several hundred people gave up a loud cheer as the cream-coloured brick, standing stark in the blazing fall sun, crumbled to the ground. Clapping and loud sobs were released as a dust cloud lifted into the air and dozens of survivors, their families and friends hugged.

A voice in the crowd asked: "Do you see any ghosts?"

The group gathered to say "good riddance" and share a minute of silence before the last remnant of the landmark centre block, looking south over the picturesque Fraser River, was demolished.

The site bore witness to sexual, physical and mental abuse against its residents, offences acknowledged in a government report and later compensation package that remains controversial.

It was also the place of numerous deaths during its history, first as an insane asylum and then as an institution housing people with disabilities.

Fifteen years after it was shuttered in 1996, all that remained was one tower. It took New Westminster city council three years to issue a demolition permit, which former residents and their supporters had petitioned for for much longer. The rest of the institute had already burned down in a massive fire.

"Today is a triumphant moment for me, it's a dream come true," said Carol Dauphinais, a former resident who was moved from what she described as awful foster care as a child to even worse treatment at Woodlands.

"It'll put the horror and the memories in the dirt where they belong."

But even while the survivors snickered at the "karma" foisted upon the eerie vestige for "getting back what it helped dish out," they voiced incredulity and anger at the provincial government.

More than 1,100 survivors were promised compensation ranging from \$3,000 to \$150,000 in a class-action settlement in December 2009.

Yet only eight of 850 people who applied for the cash have received any so far, according to survivor Bill McArthur, who often acts as a spokesman for claimants.

He and many others remain even more outraged over a legal loophole that excludes several hundred other living survivors from restitution because they lived at Woodlands before 1974. It wasn't until after that time the provincial government was responsible for the residents' care.

"If this government thinks that by symbolically tearing down this building that it's going to bring closure, it will not," he said while watching the upper tower collapse. "There will be no closure until every Woodlands survivor of abuse is compensated in a fair and timely manner."

In a statement, Attorney General Shirley Bond said four representative claims are currently before the B.C. Supreme Court and they will serve as a template for future claims, which once established, will accelerate the pace of handouts.

But she said the province will stay on course with the law regarding the eligibility issue.

"We must balance the needs of the claimants and the taxpayers," she said.

New Democrat Leader Adrian Dix issued an opposing statement criticizing the technicality. He has tabled a motion in the legislature calling on the government to provide equal treatment to all survivors and will host several former residents in Victoria next week.

"I hope that the premier and her attorney general will acknowledge on that occasion how the integrity of our province is at stake if all Woodlands survivors are not offered compensation," he said.

Tears rolled down the cheeks of former resident Shelly Starr, who travelled from her home in Prince Rupert for the ceremony, as she reflected on one chapter ending and the dawn of an anticipated new chapter, where residents also receive a fulsome apology.

"Christy Clark, we want you to recognize us today and unlock that (compensation) and respect our wishes."  
A memorial is being planned to stand in the place of the old school and it may include a garden.