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Ex-residents cheer as former B.C. residential school is torn down

By LAURA KANE

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Hundreds of reports of physical and sexual abuse have emerged from the facility

Woodlands School is now little more than rubble and dust.

But for many former residents, the scars remain from the abuse they suffered at the infamous New Westminster residential facility.

Carol Dauphinais, now in her 60s, was admitted to the school for "severe mental retardation" as a teenager. She was routinely force fed, stripped naked and leashed to chairs, she said.

"To this day it sends shivers down my spine to look at this building," she said Tuesday. "It's time to put the horror and the memories in the dust where they belong."

Later that afternoon, Ms. Dauphinais and other former residents cheered as Woodlands - which operated from 1878 to 1996 as a residential facility for people with developmental and physical disabilities - was torn down.

Hundreds of reports of physical and sexual abuse have emerged from the facility. A 2001 provincial government review revealed that residents were kicked and shoved, bathed in scalding water and shackled and leashed. Some sexual-abuse cases resulted in pregnancies.

The government closed the facility in 1996 and sold the land to developers who mostly built condominiums. The Woodlands school itself was not demolished because the 133-year-old facility was designated as a heritage site. That designation has since been rescinded.

A fire destroyed most of the facility in 2008, leaving only a single building, the Centre Block Tower, standing.

Bill MacArthur, who spent nearly his entire childhood at Woodlands, wiped tears from his eyes as a wrecking machine plowed into the crumbling white building.

But he said the facility's destruction brought emotional relief, not closure.

"I'm happy to see the building go down," he said. However, until all the Woodlands survivors are compensated, he added, "there will be no closure."

The B.C. Supreme Court settled a class-action lawsuit by 850 former Woodlands residents in 2009, ruling that those who lived in the facility after Aug. 1, 1974, could apply for compensation. This date is when B.C. passed a law allowing civil actions to be brought against the government.

The settlement left out hundreds whose claims of abuse involve incidents that took place before that date - including Mr. MacArthur, who missed the cut-off by just 10 days.

David Klein, lawyer for the Woodlands plaintiffs, said many of the residents who lived at the facility before August 1974 are now elderly and need compensation the most. Only eight claims of those eligible have been filed so far, he said.

"It really is a human tragedy. It is a shameful position by the government to leave those out of the settlement," Mr. Klein said.

B.C. Attorney-General Shirley Bond said in a statement she was aware that many former residents were concerned about the exclusion of claims before 1974, but that the "law and the courts" guided the government's decision.

"In matters such as these, we must balance the needs of the claimants and the taxpayers," she said. "I am proud that it was this government that finally took the steps to enter into a settlement process that will see hundreds of residents being compensated."


Jane Dyson, executive director of the BC Coalition of People with Disabilities, applauded the facility's demolition but also called for all survivors to be compensated.

"The demolition will provide a symbolic end to a terrible legacy for people with disabilities and for the former residents," she said.

"But until the full community of survivors have their suffering recognized, it is a symbol without substance."

With a report by Wendy Stueck

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