

## **CLOSE THE DAMN THING DOWN**

**Submitted by**

**Peter Bourne and Fred Ford**

Peter Bourne and Fred Ford are B.C.'s representatives on the Task Force on Deinstitutionalization. Peter is a singer, guitarist and an active community volunteer in Victoria. Peter has lived in institutions and he feels strongly that all people with disabilities should be supported to live in their own homes in the community. Fred is the Executive Director of Mary Manning Centre. He began to learn about the institutions when he worked at Huronia Regional Centre in Ontario in the early 1970s and he has been an advocate for deinstitutionalization and community living ever since.

**Peter and Fred:** We would like to help other people get out of institutions and we think it is important to help Canadians right across the country to understand that the community has everything a person needs and that all institutions in Canada should be closed.

**Fred:** When I hear about provinces investing millions of dollars in institutions or people fighting against institution closures, it helps me to remember Peter's unique brand of advocacy and also, that the deinstitutionalization movement is like other civil rights movements where the battle is never really over and where advocates face setbacks and barriers that seem insurmountable.

**Peter:** I can't see people's facial expressions, so I try to touch people's hearts with my singing. I can sometimes give people an inspiration with my singing. Some people might say, how can a blind person have the qualifications to be a leader? I think I do but I don't have a lot of schooling. What do you think? I think so. People can know from their own experience. I have come from a long way. I've lived in a lot of places and I know where I'm coming from. When I was young, my parents tried to make sure I had the very best. But in those days they didn't have much in the community for blind people. In the 1950s, I lived at an institution in Nova Scotia, then at Jericho Hill School in Vancouver and then at Woodlands Institution in New Westminster for nine years in the 1960s.

**Fred:** In BC, even though all of the large institutions for people with developmental disabilities have been closed, there is still much to be done. Deinstitutionalization means much more than just closing big institutions. Some of the challenges we face in BC include helping people with developmental disabilities to get out of other kinds of long-term care facilities and psychiatric institutions, ensuring that all people are well supported in the community and ensuring that people who were harmed when they lived in the institutions receive justice and restitution.

**Peter:** We hear from people on the Task Force that the government of Manitoba is putting forty million dollars into the institution there – I disagree – it's a waste of money. The politicians in Manitoba need to listen to people with disabilities. They need to put that money into community services for people with disabilities, jobs and meaningful activities in their communities. They need to open the doors to community and close institutions once and for all. People blossom in the community! We are human beings and we should be part of the community like everyone else. Fred and I have also talked about the situation in Ontario – about staff and families saying people need the institution. They are wrong! Everyone can live in the community, even people who need support 24 hours a day – people with all kinds of disabilities live in the community. There is nothing that the institution can do that the community can't do better. I say 'close the

damn thing down' because it's not good for people – they lose their independence, it's not good or healthy for people to be in the institution.

Community agencies aren't perfect either, you see. Sometimes it takes a while to find the right living arrangement in the community – but if something doesn't work out that doesn't mean that the person needs an institution. I lived for a while in a place where I wasn't treated well. A social worker from the CNIB she said to me, 'are you willing to take that step, to pay your own rent and live on your own?' It was a scary step for me but I'm glad I said yes, because if I'd said no, I don't know where I'd be today. My moving days are over. I pay my own bills and I go to bed when I want to. The best thing is I don't have to get permission. I let people know where I'll be and how long I'll be gone – it's courtesy. I love having my own room, taking a shower when I want, having my privacy when I'm having a phone conversation with somebody and playing my music.

**Peter and Fred:** We both feel that the time has come for Canadians to demand that all institutions in Canada be closed, for governments and communities to support all people to live in their own homes in the community and for governments across the country to participate in a constructive process to acknowledge and make amends for the harms done to people in Canada's institutions. We also need to teach people about the institutions. We'd like to see people take courses about the institutions – in primary schools, high schools and universities. We don't want them to have nightmares, but if they don't learn about it, people will again try to say that institutions are a wonderful thing. They aren't! We need to get away from that kind of thinking by making sure people know what it was like. The younger parents need to learn about it too. More doctors and the medical community need to know more and do more to support community living. Society needs to be educated that institutions are not the way to go - we need to speak out, not let things slide back.

**Peter:** I believe in doing something. I don't believe in sitting back doing nothing. I don't want to sit back, knowing where I've come from. We need to let people know we are human beings. Some people say, 'let that go', when someone says something like 'we're going to have institutions again'. I sang *We Shall Overcome* on the radio because it reminds me of Dr. Martin Luther King. He wasn't disabled, but he knew what it was like because people hated him just because of the color of his skin. I sang it because it shows that we self advocates are not afraid to speak out. I spent almost nine years in Woodlands, some people spent all of their lives in the institutions and we can't let that happen any more.