

An interview with Roy Skoreyko  
As told to Norm McLeod

We sit with Roy in a coffee shop in downtown Edmonton talking about life. We talk politics. He likes Stephane Dion and hopes the new Liberal leader will bring changes to the environment and the federal government. When asked about Alberta's Premier Stelmack; "He's a good Ukrainian!" Roy is full of jokes, has a great sense of humor, is quick to laugh, and makes clever comments that have us all smiling. It's hard to image Roy growing up in Red Deer's Michener Centre.

"I've been out of Michener for about 30 years," says Roy. "When I was 10, I was classified as slow learner and was sent to the provincial training school. We were a poor family, we lived in Elk Point on a farm near St. Paul. I have a younger brother who was also classified as slow and he went to Winifred Stewart School." In those days parents took the advice from doctors and Roy's family doctor advised that he be moved away from his family after grade one. "There was a school in Michener that I went to," says Roy. I didn't go far in school because they wanted us to work inside the centre. We were working with the garden crew, laundry and kitchen." Rather than going to school like other kids his age, Roy spent his summers hoeing and picking weeds and in working in the laundry through the winter."

He talks about abuse and kids getting beat-up by each other and by staff, but it seems like the constant control and lack of freedom had a stronger affect on him. "It was tough times there because we didn't have the freedom that we have now," says Roy. "We had to line up to go for meals, the day room was always locked so we couldn't leave. We had to sit on the floor when we watched TV or listened to the radio. We had to line up naked to go for a shower and everyone went in to one big area to shower. There was no privacy. To sleep it was dormitory style, beds were all lined up and we had to share with a bunch of other people."

"We didn't have areas for keeping our own belongings. We had toothbrushes and a few cloths on a shelf; a couple feet big. They kept our clothes and issued us with ward clothes. The only time we got to wear clothes our parents bought us was when we were going home. If your name wasn't in them you wouldn't keep them."

It's hard to imagine how hard the lack of freedom must have been on Roy as a boy. He pauses in the midst of describing bathrooms with no doors and the toilets sitting in the middle of the floor to make a couple of quick funny comments to lighten the mood.

Then Roy tells the story of how they were told they were going on a trip, instead they were taken to the infirmary and sterilized. "It was never explained to us, they just said we were going on a trip and instead we were sterilized."

But the transition from Michener Centre to the community wasn't an easy one for Roy. "It was for me when I moved out of Michener because everyone wanted to do things for me. The hardest part was doing things for myself because I had people doing things for

me all my life. I had to learn how to do my own banking and pay bills, cooking, laundry. I had to learn how to stand up for myself.” Now he’s standing up for others too.

“I got more involved by sitting on boards and began speaking and helping others speak, self advocacy, along with AACL and people in Toronto have really helped me. People like Bruce Uditsky and Sandra Mack helped teach me how to speak out and advocate for myself. We all have dreams and I encourage others to speak for themselves.”

Roy was the first person with a disability to sit on one of Alberta’s Persons with Developmental Disabilities Community Boards. “When I sat on the PDD board I wasn’t a board member at first, I was a board intern. I was part of the board but didn’t have a voting right, because members had to be appointed by the Minister.” Now there are other self-advocates regularly sit on PDD boards. “I gave my advice on issues, sometimes they were confidential matters, budgets and things. We made a lot of tough decisions and we had to answer to the Minister. I was surprised by how many people had a say in decisions.”

“When I moved out of Michener I made two Promises, to stand up for the rights of self advocates who are living in the community and to protect the rights of those still living in institutions. I would like to see the institutions closed across the country. We have a plan, we have a strong voice from people first groups that are in willing to do something about it,” says Roy. “I consider self advocates as my family. I slept in the same dorms as them; I ate the same meals as them. I think that it doesn’t matter if self-advocates have to work with government officials to make the system work. We can complain and gripe but we have to go there and look them in the face and ask for help. Government officials are slowly learning that it can be different. You can’t forget how far we’ve come.”

“When I leave this world I want people to remember me for who I am. I’m a person first. We all have some kind of disability. I want people to remember me for what I’ve done.”