

'It's a family secret'

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Thursday October 25, 2007 -- Natalie Miller

While driving along Hwy. 400 towards the family cottage, Jeanne Robinson's husband, out of the blue, gestured towards Orillia and said he had a sister who lives there.

Marrying Bob, whom she thought was an only child, Jeanne was obviously dumbfounded.

When she asked her husband where he was pointing towards, he told Jeanne his sister, Lynn, lived in Huronia Regional Centre.

"It's a family secret. Nobody knows about it," Jeanne recalls her now late husband telling her at the time.

When they arrived at the cottage, Bob, the couple's twin boys and Jeanne's father-in-law went fishing. Sitting on the dock with her mother-in-law, Jeanne announced she knew about Lynn. "She started to cry," Jeanne recalls, adding her mother-in-law said, "You must think I'm a terrible mother."

Working in special education for nearly 30 years, Jeanne says she knew her mother-in-law was comfortable around people with disabilities as the woman had been involved in fundraisers at the school and had children over to her house. Jeanne also knew that placing children with disabilities in institutions was something doctors told parents to do back then.

Lynn, who has Down syndrome, was placed in an infant home when she was seven days old and from there was moved to Huronia Regional Centre, an institution for people with intellectual disabilities in Orillia that is slated for closure in 2009. When the 'family secret' was shared, Lynn was in her twenties.

Jeanne encouraged the family to visit Lynn. Bob met his sister once when he was a child. Lynn's parents dropped off birthday and Christmas presents in November each year.

About two months later, Bob, Jeanne and the twin boys went to meet Lynn. "She came running to the car," says Jeanne. "When I went into this girl's room, there were no family photos," she says. Jeanne put together a photo album containing photographs of Lynn's parents, her brother, her sister-in-law and her nephews. "She belongs to us. She didn't fall out of the sky."

"She was delighted with the whole thing," says Jeanne. The visits continued over the years and Lynn took great joy in getting to know Calley Lynn, Bob and Jeanne's daughter who they named after her. Lynn changed her diapers, held her new niece and fed her a bottle.

The family was comfortable visiting Lynn at the institution but it took several years before they agreed to have Lynn home for a visit, says Jeanne.

Part two of a two-part series

'She's part of us'

After 51 years in Huronia Regional Centre, woman moves to community
Monday October 29, 2007 -- Natalie Miller

Four years ago, at age 47, Lynn Robinson spent her first Christmas with family outside of Huronia Regional Centre.

Her brother, Bob, made a toast to his sister, before those present which included Lynn's mother, her sister-in-law, her niece and her nephews. It was no doubt a special Christmas for Lynn, who shared in the joy of family and presents under the tree with her name on them. It was the only Christmas also in which she celebrated with her brother and mother who both died the following year.

Lynn, institutionalized as an infant after being diagnosed with Down syndrome, is the last living Robinson. Her sister-in-law, Jeanne, who was instrumental in arranging the Christmas gathering, embraced Lynn as part of the family, when she learned her husband had a sister at Huronia about 25 years ago. Jeanne encouraged the family to become part of Lynn's life and Jeanne and her daughter, Calley, continue to be close.

Today, Lynn lives in a home in Milton with roommates. She is supported by Community Living North Halton.

She moved out of Huronia Regional Centre this past spring. Huronia in Orillia is slated for closure in March 2009. It's one of three large institutions left in Ontario to close.

"She's adjusting very well," says Jeanne.

Jeanne says Lynn missed her friends at Huronia and Community Living North Halton stepped in to arrange visits.

"My only regret is my husband didn't get to spend more time with her."

When it came time for Lynn to move, Jeanne and Calley took her shopping. Lynn chose the bed and linens for her room and decorated the walls with family photos and pictures of Princess Diana, whom she adores. "She was as much of a part of the move as she could be," says Jeanne.

Lynn spends all holidays with Jeanne's large Greek family.

"It's like she has never not been here," says Jeanne, who also lives in Milton.

"She's part of us."