

Book exposes details of former asylums in Ontario

By JOSEPH CHIN
Staff

Daisy Lumsden remembers being punished for trying to escape from Huronia Regional Centre.

"They tortured me. They put me in a ice-cold tub of ice water — the cold pack treatment they calls it, an' me menserating," she said.

Lumsden's harrowing treatment and that of other residents in the Orillia institution — not atypical of thousands of mentally-retarded children and adults who were once locked in asylums in Ontario over the decades — is recounted in Thelma Wheatley's book, *And*

Neither Have I Wings to Fly, subtitled *Labelled and Locked Up in Canada's Oldest Institution*.

Meticulously researched, it's the shocking true story of the institutionalization and abuse of children and adults with intellectual and physical handicaps in the institution now known as Huronia Regional Centre, formerly the Asylum for Idiots and Feeble-Minded, which was shut down in 2009.

The book, the first to be written from the patients' viewpoint, was officially launched last Thursday in Toronto before a packed house, with the publisher selling out all copies it had on hand.

In writing the book, Wheatley, who lives in

Port Credit, says she was motivated by a need to know all she could about Orillia, about placing children there against their will.

"I'm the mother of a child who could well have ended up in the institution, but had not," she said. "I'm a mother who said 'no' to putting her child away."

Wheatley's son, Julian, is autistic. Her 2004 book, *My Sad Is All Gone*, chronicles her family's efforts to raise him at home.



Thelma Wheatley

It was through her son's friends, some of whom were sent to Orillia, and Special Olympics, that Wheatley first became aware of the institution and what happened within its walls.

Why have I not heard about the place before, she remembers asking herself.

The time frame of *And Neither Have I Wings to Fly* — 1900-1966 — covers

the most controversial decades in the institution's history, a time of over-crowding and abuses that peaked in the 1950s and 1960s when the inmate population was nearly 3,000.

In a stroke of good timing, the book, which took Wheatley seven years to research and write, comes out mere months before a \$1-billion class action lawsuit against the government of Ontario on behalf of former patients will be heard. The lawsuit will begin Sept. 30 at Osgoode Hall in Toronto.

Wheatley's book exposes many of the abuses cited in the lawsuit and shows how, despite warnings and reports from government inspectors condemning the place, the government continued with its policy of institutionalization.

"Daisy's history was, in a sense, a microcosm of the greater macrocosm of the phenomenon called 'institutionalization,' which spanned a whole era, from the eugenicists in the early 1900s to 'deinstitutionalization' in the 1980s," Wheatley writes.

Of course, says Wheatley, one must not be too quick to judge and condemn another era from the vantage point of today, replete with a social network and the Canadian Charter of Rights.

"There were legitimate concerns, for Toronto and Canada had been inundated with over three million poor immigrants during the 19th and early 20th century, overwhelming Toronto in particular," she said. "The fear that a new underclass would overwhelm and outbreed the upper classes, known as the 'fertility differential' — hotly debated — was the more ominous."

Wheatley is holding an author reading May 2 at Port Credit Library, starting at 7 p.m.

The book, published by Inanna Publications at York University, will be available for sale. It's also available online at Amazon and Chapters.

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