

## One woman's journey with autistic son shines new light on darker side of Orillia and Aurora



**By Brock Weir**

Thelma Wheatley's autistic son was just four when a developmental paediatrician advised her and her husband to "put him away" at the Ontario Hospital School in Orillia.

He would never amount to anything, the doctor told his parents, they would not be able to raise him themselves and, if they did, it would have adverse effects on their elder daughter, she recalls.

"They would be much better capable of raising him than us, and we weren't very good parents anyway," she remembers the doctor telling her, with a shrug. "We refused to put him away."

As he got older, their son began to thrive. Developmentally challenged, he began participating in the Special Olympics and both he and his parents began making friends.

As they attended games, Ms. Wheatley began to learn more and more about the people his son was playing with. Many of them grew up at the Orillia institution and the more they talked, the more they relayed the "terrible abuses" they experienced behind those walls.

In 1995, she and her husband visited the place where they were told to put their son and were "shocked" at what they saw.

"I was so glad I didn't put my son away," she says, noting it inspired her to write a book. "I decided I would write a book from the point of view of the residents and it was just fate that brought Daisy into my life."

Daisy is the central figure in Ms. Wheatley's book "And Neither Have I Wings To Fly", which charts the history and trauma of the Orillia Hospital School from Daisy's perspective.

Ms. Wheatley first met Daisy in church and they became fast friends. When they started to discuss the Hospital School, Daisy confided she had grown up in the asylum and asked Thelma to help secure her medical records, which she had not been able to obtain herself.

"When I did, we read them and I found her mother had been in Orillia and her grandmother had been in an infamous asylum in Liverpool," says Ms. Wheatley. "Her parents had come over from England, they were both mentally handicapped and had 22 mentally handicapped children. I realised here I had a really great story as her mother was still alive in her 80s and I had firsthand recollections of this family that had been put away."

Not only had Daisy's mother been 'put away', but so had many of her brothers, along with a sister. The sister was thrown into the school for having an illegitimate child. Through her research, Ms. Wheatley found the illegitimate son and from there, the story shifts to Aurora.

The long-lost son had been put into Orillia without his family's knowledge as he was taken away from his mother almost immediately after birth, she says. From Orillia, when the school became crowded, he was transferred to Pine Ridge, the institution which was once housed in the Ministry of Transportation building on the northwest corner of Yonge Street and Bloomington Road.

Pine Ridge was built in 1915 as an offshoot of the Catholic De La Salle College for boys. By 1950, the building had been taken over to handle overflow from the Ontario Hospital School, which was, by then the Huronia Regional Centre. It closed as an institution by 1985.

From there, and speaking to surviving inmates of Pine Ridge, Ms. Wheatley says she discovered although they were smaller and geographically separate from Orillia, they shared rotating staff and experienced similar 'abuses.'

Ms. Wheatley brings her story to the Aurora Public Library on Thursday, April 17 at 7 p.m.

There, she will relay Daisy's story from her early days, to the \$35 million class-action lawsuit brought against the School by survivors.

'Most Canadians have no idea of the existence of these hospital schools or institutions, and I want to provide knowledge about this,' she says. 'Daisy's husband was placed in the boy's home in Aurora and it is ironic that all these things happened in Aurora. She never knew her cousin was put in Aurora and didn't know her husband had been in Aurora.'

'I would like people to think about the responsibilities of citizens to make sure the government provides services for people with mentally handicapped children because that is why the institutions were opened and that is why they were kept going - there were no services for families.'

For more information on Ms. Wheatley's free talk, contact the Aurora Public Library at 905-727-9494 x275.