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Back to the Future

Revisiting Canada's first Alzheimer's residential care centre



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Revisiting Canada's first Alzheimer's residential care centre

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A garden on the path at McConnell Place North in Edmonton, Alberta. McConnell was one of Canada's first residential care centre for people with Alzheimer's. Story on **page 6**.

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Back to the Future

Revisiting Canada's first Alzheimer's residential care centre

by Bernadette DeSantis & Michael Lalonde

Fifteen years before the incidence of Alzheimer's disease would reach what is now seen as near epidemic proportions, CapitalCare – the largest public long-term care provider in Canada – opened a care centre that would help lead others towards developing new models of caring for people with Alzheimer's.

Now, as a rising tide of aging baby boomers approaches, there is hope that while researchers continue to look for a cure, caregivers across the country have found a way to provide quality of life for the over 1.1 million Canadians who will acquire Alzheimer's disease in the next 30 years.

McConnell Place North in Edmonton, Alberta, was one of Canada's first residential care centre for people with Alzheimer's. The opening on July 19, 1995 of the stand-alone,

one-storey, home-like centre built on 2.4 acres of park-like land in the heart of an established residential neighbourhood represented a departure in both building design and care philosophy from traditional long-term care centres of the era.

Traditional nursing homes, many of which were built in the 60s and 70s, were for people with dementia and other chronic disabling diseases who could not return to living at home after a stay in hospital. Most were built in the image of hospitals – multi-level institutions with several hundred “beds” spread out over various units. It was not uncommon, even as the doors to McConnell first opened, to find centres with four-bed wards, institutional tub rooms and nursing stations as the central core.

Unlike people who require the sub-acute care provided in a long-term care setting, people in the early to mid stages of Alzheimer's disease are better suited to a more home-like environment.

CapitalCare Senior Researcher Dr. Doris Milke explains,



"Often times when an Alzheimer's patient is put into a traditional nursing home, they don't know what their role is. Imagine it's your first day in a foreign country. How do you act? This is what Alzheimer's patients feel. They are confused. They'll try to help nurses that unfortunately brush them off.

"When they enter a residential care centre that looks similar to a home, such as McConnell Place North, they immediately figure out they should be acting like they are at home."

CapitalCare modeled McConnell Place North after Woodside Place in Oakmont, Pennsylvania. The 24,750 square foot, E-shaped building can accommodate 36 residents, 30 in private rooms, over the three houses that are colour coded blue, rose and green to help residents find their way.

Each house has its own kitchen, living and dining room, laundry room, bathing room and one double-room. There is a great room for communal activities, wide, sunlit hallways for walking indoors and a sprawling outdoor area complete with a gazebo, meandering paths and an array of gardens. All pathways lead back to a door into the centre.

Nursing stations do not exist. Medications are stored in small closets and LPNs work from the house kitchens instead, which is also where some of the meals are prepared. Residents help out around the house to the best of their abilities. They may set the table, help clean up after the meal, fold linen, and help themselves to leftovers from the fridge.

Staff blend right in. Since uniforms are not required, staff are distinguished from residents and visitors by their name tags.

"This gives the staff the mindset that this is a home, not a place of work," says Manager Sheri Seghers.

Days pass at McConnell as they would at home. Residents decide what time to wake up, and breakfast is always available. If a resident can't sleep at night, the care staff will probably pop some popcorn, turn on a movie and watch it with them.

There are group activities throughout the day, but if a resident doesn't want to join in they are able to simply observe, watch a DVD or perhaps walk outside.

Stephanie Sprysak, a 99-year-old resident, can routinely be found sunning herself in McConnell's award-winning backyard. Seghers recalls: "It was a beautiful summer day and she was wearing a wide-brimmed sun hat and shorts. She had been stretching and exercising and stopped to tell me this exercise regime kept her outdoors gardening and kept her healthy. She then told me she had to get going and proceeded to weed the flower beds."

Activities Convenor Sherri Bessette, who arranges for all kinds of group activities from visiting with the neighbourhood school children to baking and social dances, says giving the residents the freedom to be themselves is what matters most.

"If a resident would rather take a stroll through the backyard than join in a live music sing-a-long, that is more than okay. It's their home after all."

No one is more at home at McConnell than resident Steve Nahulak. The 88-year-old former handyman came to McConnell in August 2005 after a brief stay at a traditional long-term care centre.



Stephanie Sprysak can be routinely found sunning herself in the award winning backyard.

"He was functioning on a level so much higher than the other residents," Steve's daughter Louise Buttineau recalls. "It was so sad to see how he secluded himself."

At McConnell, Steve, who is one of only four male residents, is the life of the party. Within his first year, Steve played father-of-the-bridal in a wedding reminiscence activity that made national news. At the 15th anniversary celebrations, he broke spontaneously into song – in Ukrainian – during the speeches. He doesn't greet people with a simple handshake, he kisses their hand instead.

"We knew he'd found himself a new home when we took him back to his house for Christmas and at the end of the night he turned to me and asked if he could go back home, to McConnell," says Buttineau.

Family satisfaction surveys confirm the McConnell model is a hit with both residents and their families. Every family member who participated in the 1999, 2001 and 2005 surveys indicated they were satisfied with the care their loved one was receiving. The current 2010 survey results were not ready at the time of publishing.

With financial support from individuals and communities, CapitalCare was able to replicate the model twice over with McConnell Place West, opened in 1998, and the Strathcona Alzheimer Care Centre, opened in Sherwood Park, Alberta in 2001. In addition to their physical similarities, each of the centres takes the same person-centred approach to care.

"We don't see people with Alzheimer's as patients who need treatment, but rather as people with past lives who, with our guidance and support, can continue living life to the best of their abilities," says Iris Neumann, Chief Executive Officer for CapitalCare.

In the past decade, similar residential care centres have been built across the country such as the Dorothy Macham Home in Toronto, Highview Residences in London, the renovated dementia care at the Lodge at Broadmead in Victoria, and new this year, Aven Cottages Territorial Dementia Facility in Yellowknife.

A web search for dementia care cottages finds 24 in Alberta, where McConnell has been a strong influence, as well as two in Calgary - Signal Pointe and Wing Kei Villa - that were built shortly after McConnell.

Despite the advances made in care options for people with early to mid-stage Alzheimer's, researchers continue to be challenged in finding ways to best serve the growing dementia population.

Rising Tide: The Impact of Dementia on Canadian Society, a recent study by the Alzheimer Society, predicts the number of Canadians with dementia will more than double to 1.125 million people by 2038.

Says Milke, "The unfortunate reality of dementia is that people eventually lose their remaining abilities, and when that happens, long term care in a facility is at present our best option."



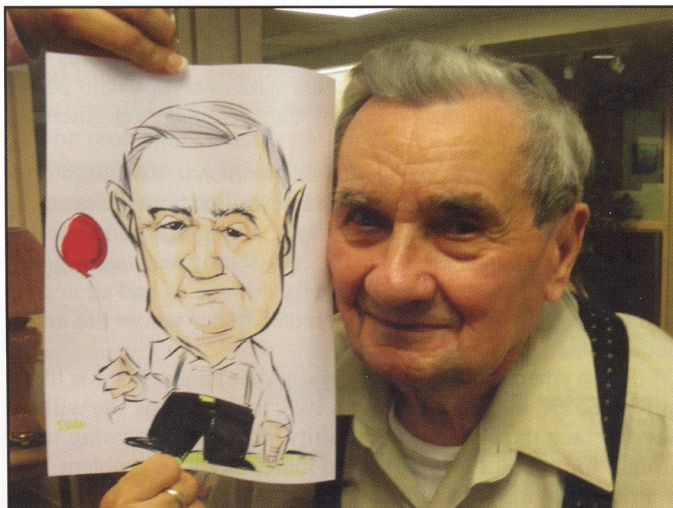
Above: The meandering path at McConnell Place North.

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Above: Activity convenor Sherri Bessette and Steve Nahulak dancing.

Below: Steve poses with his caricature.



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