

## Authors

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## Out From Under: Disability, History and Things to Remember

Curated by Kathryn Church, Catherine Frazee and Melanie Panitch, appeared at the Royal Ontario Museum in spring and early summer 2008. The Royal Ontario Museum described the exhibit as follows,

*Out from Under: Disability, History and Things to Remember* explores the history of disabled people in Canada. A display of thirteen diverse objects reveals a rich and nuanced story that pays tribute to the resilience, creativity, and the civic and cultural contributions of Canadians with disabilities.

The first of its kind in Canada, this remarkable exhibition was produced in collaboration with students, scholars and alumni from Ryerson University. The origin of *Out from Under* was a special topic seminar designed to uncover the hidden history of disability in Canada. Students were invited to identify an object representing a particular era or moment in Canadian disability history and explore its significance. Retrieved October 27, 2008, from [http://www.rom.on.ca/exhibitions/special/out\\_from\\_under.php](http://www.rom.on.ca/exhibitions/special/out_from_under.php), retrieved October 27, 2008

In early July 2008, a group of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning (LGBTQ) youth, who had been told they had intellectual disabilities, were taken on a tour of the Out From Under: Disability, History and Things To Remember exhibit and were engaged in a conversation about what they saw. Below are some of things the youth had to say about the exhibit. (In some cases, clarification and/or more detail is provided by J. Paterson who accompanied the group on their tour of the exhibit.)

### What did you expect to see or learn before you went to see the exhibit?

The Compass Youth:  
We didn't know everything about disability history. We thought history would have been happy.  
We thought it would be very interesting to learn about the history of disability.  
We thought going to the museum would be an adventure.

### What were your first impressions? How did the exhibit make you feel?

The Compass Youth:  
We thought the stories were sad.  
We thought the history was really depressing. People were not able to leave an institution. We know what that's like, so

it's really depressing. We hated reading about the sufferings. Reading the stuff (stickers) off the kid's trunk got us thinking that our lives could be worse.

*Jennifer:*

*Several sections of the exhibit included photographs and stories of institutionalization. The section Packing included a trunk. The trunk belonged to a 7 year old boy who was moving to the Orillia Asylum for Idiots. The trunk was covered with stickers. Each sticker displayed a question that the 7 year old might have asked. "Was I bad?" "Will I see my parents again?" "When will I come home?" "Where am I going?" The boy who owned the trunk lived in the Orillia Asylum for many years.*

The Compass Youth:

Their faces in some of photographs look like they're very sad there.

*Jennifer:*

*The section "Dressing" includes a photograph of residents in an unknown institution. All of the men in the photo are wearing the same white uniform. The residents all had somber expressions on their faces.*

The Compass Youth:

What we hated the most was the testing part. We've had to go through it, and honestly, it was like a bitch. Just looking at it reminded us of the worst things that happened to us in school.

*Jennifer:*

*Another section was called "Measuring". Measuring contained a reproduction of a room typically used for psychological and intelligence testing. The reproduction testing room contained a large desk for the psychologist and a small desk for the child being tested. Materials from a Stanford-Binet Intelligence testing kit were placed around the room.*

The Compass Youth:

Disappointment. People are just going through an unfair time. People are just struggling with misery. People are just not very happy with what they're going through and they just wish that they would be more of a comfortable setting and they would just have health and strength, and that everybody would be into more of a happy life. And treated well, with dignity.

### **What did you learn?**

#### **What was new to you?**

The Compass Youth:

We didn't know where they used to put those kids.

We didn't know how they put people in those suits. It just looked like wrong, like how they used to make people dress in that category just because they're disabled.

*Jennifer:*

*The section "Dressing" contains track suits. The track suits were like the clothing that people in institutions were forced to wear. The track suits were meant to take away individual choice and identity.*

### **What else would you like to see?**

The Compass Youth:

We have more questions about the history. Did the people find out later that their clothes were stolen? Is he [the 7 year old who owned the packing trunk] still alive? It's very sad when a 7 year old kid is taken away from his family. After [he was institutionalized] he had like no child life. Did they take him away or did his parent put him in the institution?

That kid is stuck in our minds...Everything else was really sad, but that one particularly just got us. He was younger, and he had no choice about what happened. He didn't get to do anything with his life. He must have got stuck inside and never had a child life. We want to learn more about all these kids that got thrown away.

### **What objects would you add to the exhibit if you could?**

The Compass Youth:

Pictures of growing up. Pictures of people learning all the neat things that you're supposed to learn when you were younger.

A music box. Growing up, we loved music and still do. Music and pictures of dancing would be a big thing to add. We would just put all of that there to show we love these things.

We would add our monthly cheque from ODSP. It would show how we can budget in it without anyone's help.

We would put in a plaque about Jay. [The founder of the Compass group].

*Jennifer:*

*Objects are important in this exhibit. Each section was built around an object. All of the objects tell us something about disability history. The objects are a way for people with disabilities and their allies to tell stories about disability history. The objects are only a small part of disability history. There are many more stories to be told. Every visitor to the exhibit was asked to suggest an object that would tell us something about disability history.*

### **Who else should see this exhibit?**

The Compass Youth:

Teenagers who have a disability. They would love to come here and learn about the history of disability. They like to learn new things and they might actually like it.

### **Was the exhibit accessible to you?**

We don't think we would manage without a guide. All the reading would be hard.

It helped to have someone tell us stories when we saw the exhibit.

*Jennifer:*

*I explained each section of the exhibit in a story for the youth. There is a lot of text to read in each section. Together we had conversations about the stories, objects and pictures in each section. We were not able to complete all thirteen sections.*

### **About the Authors:**

*The Compass Youth:* Compass is a weekly group for youth under 25 who are labelled with intellectual disabilities to explore sexual and gender identities – including youth who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, intersex, two-spirit, queer and questioning (LGBTTTIQQ). The group includes movies, outings, art making, discussion and sexual health information. Compass is part of the Griffin Centre's ReachOUT program. Griffin Centre is a non-profit charitable mental health agency providing flexible and accessible services to youth, adults and their families. Our mission is to promote positive change for vulnerable youth and adults with mental health challenges and/or developmental disabilities and their families. We are dedicated to delivering innovative

services and developing creative partnerships that enhance lives and communities. Within Griffin Centre, ReachOUT is a creative, inclusive & accessible program for LGBTTTIQQ youth in north Toronto. This includes drop-in groups, community outreach, consultation, counselling, art & skills exchange. We offer a safe space for all youth that reflects the diversity of our queer and trans communities.

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### **For More Information, Please Contact:**

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