

The Freedom Tour

On March 31st 2009, the last three large residential institutions in Ontario shut their doors forever as the province moved to repeal the *Developmental Services Act*. Their closure was the final act in a half-century struggle to end the institutionalization of persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

To mark this disability rights milestone, I took several teenagers, with and without disabilities, to one of the many celebratory screenings of a documentary, *The Freedom Tour*. We traveled with Valerie, David and other People First members for about an hour. When it was over, we felt as if the journey would only now begin.

The Freedom Tour was created, directed and video-taped by People First of Canada (2006), and documents the continuing struggle to close institutions for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities across Canada. Inspired by the documentary *How's Your News?* (n.d.), a group of activists with intellectual disabilities board a van and drive across the prairie provinces. Their "tour" begins with a stop at the Manitoba Developmental Centre (MDC). Their goal was to interview residents and gather archival materials. However, after being refused entry to MDC, the filmmakers revise their vision. They embark instead on a cross-province tour to interview eight survivors of residential institutions.

The documentary is shot with hand held digital video recorders. As Timothy Penner remarks:

...the film is an obviously low budget affair. Still, this lack of aestheticism provides an unsophisticated beauty that reminds us that this is truly a labour of love and a cry for change from a group of people who have been deeply wronged.

—(Penner, 2009: <http://uniter.ca/view/166/>)

Like other forms of participatory documentary-making, digital video cameras give marginalized people the tools to insert their perspective into the public sphere. The documentary's format and development allows previously muted voices to come to the fore. I was struck by how rare it was to watch any film in which so many people with intellectual disabilities were prominently featured—or given so much "air-time."

The documentary forces us to confront one horrific story after another. Tales of repeated attempts to escape institutions, followed by epilogues of repeated "captures" and subsequent punishments. Stories of misguided intentions to protect people from others and from themselves. Accounts of unsupervised locked wards at night. Images of rows of toilets

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without partitions. Archival footage of people naked, fighting, sexualized and otherwise objectified. Severely sanitized images of the medical offices at the Michener Centre where almost 3000 people were sterilized. Reference shots of the Manitoba Developmental Centre, a recent recipient of \$40 million in renovation funds. This last image, a stark grey building, prompted a young woman beside me to gasp: "My god, it looks like a jail." Another 14 year old, shaken out of adolescent complacency, leaned over to say "I don't get it. These people didn't do anything wrong did they?"

She's not alone in her questioning. It seems unfathomable that people could be involuntarily incarcerated, often first as young children, and forced to remain confined in dehumanizing conditions in a contemporary era. As one mother, who was eventually barred from entering Manitoba Developmental Centre after persistently trying to secure her adult daughter's release, observes "This is 2006...not the movies... not 30 years ago."

The film's message is clear and singular—"Free our People." It is articulated best by one of the People First members: "If you leave one person in there (the institution), 15 will come back. It leaves the door open." *The Freedom Tour* pulls no punches. No one strives for "objectivity." No one plays the devil's advocate. No one asks..."but what about the workers?" This is an unapologetic testimony about the horrors of segregation and incarceration. The only solution is to close institutions.

The documentary is not unsparing though. Astonishingly, the audience around us—which included many people with developmental disabilities—laughed, hooted, cheered and, at one point, broke into a chorus of "Amazing Grace." Small stories of friendship, critical insight and resistance mitigate the painful accounts of isolation and abuse. In the end, *The Freedom Tour* is as much a documentary about survival as it is an indictment of the exclusionary and violent treatment of people with developmental disabilities.

When the film ended, a People First representative addressed the audience: "People First thinks there is nothing left to be said on this topic. All the institutions should be closed." As powerful as this

statement may be and as much as we might agree, something further needs to be said.

I watched the film at a strange juncture in my own life. My partner and I are currently struggling to support our eldest daughter, a young woman labeled with a developmental disability, as she outgrows our home. Like many of her peers, at 20, she's drawn to the dream of living in a place of her own. Her forays into "the community" have been fraught with pitfalls. Irregular supports, inconsistent eligibility criteria for housing or employment, and confusing and detailed documentation to maintain income transfers have made it difficult for her to move to independence.

She came to live with us as a young teenager when her housing options were limited. In an earlier era, she may have been directed to a residential facility like those described in *The Freedom Tour*. Several years later, our greatest desire, which we share with her, is to keep her out of institutions. Like her, we envision her living with a roommate or two—but manifesting this vision often seems impossible.

The Freedom Tour does little to point the way forward. Twice we hear references to the struggle to eke out a decent life in the community. But we hear few details about those challenges. We know little about how people live...there is institutionalization, indisputably horrific. But that's it. The route to community participation isn't apparent. Some are living with their families, but the details of how this should work are noticeably absent. Life for those we encounter throughout the documentary is clearly better, but there is little indication about how to secure this "preferable destination."

While, arguably, this may not have been the intent of the film, an opportunity may present itself in the documentary's corresponding website, <http://www.freeourpeople.ca/>. On the site, visitors can find the raw footage for the documentary, including the stories of almost 50 other survivors, labeled people and their allies who participated in its making. The website contains information about the history of the documentary, links to other People First organizations and a blog largely dedicated to tracing the screenings of *The Freedom Tour*. Easy to navigate, written in plain language

and replete with photographs, there's lots to commend this website. One wonders if it could be used to continue the efforts of *The Freedom Tour* by providing examples of life after institutionalization. It would be helpful to hear stories that include the concrete steps of successfully exiting and staying out of institutions. Making use of the site's interactive features, such as the blog, could enable visitors to exchange information and resources to facilitate independent living. Looking down the road further, the site could be used to organize disabled people and allies to continue the efforts to close institutions, hold group homes and other community supports accountable and even claim restitution for survivors.

Perhaps developing the site further might redress the only the disconcertingly low number of hits it seems to have received. Over the past two months, Valerie Wolbert's video of her experiences at the MDC, have only received 11 views. Compared to the 15,000 views of a YouTube clip of a popular soap opera over a much shorter period, this number is disheartening. The low (and ostensibly decreasing) interest in the *Free Our People* site may point to troubling questions around the audience for this message.

The teenagers accompanying me to the screening certainly would not have been in the audience on their own accord. All thanked me for bringing them along to the screening, but as audience members they situated themselves outsiders looking in—tourists. However, one teen discerned a sinister underlying "story" to the documentary. She wondered why the survivors had been institutionalized at such a young age, and was skeptical of the accuracy of some people's labels. She believed some people "didn't deserve institutionalization. They seemed fine." Picking up dialogue from the documentary itself, she asserted that "some of those people didn't belong in institutions." While I initially countered with a question about whether anyone ever deserves institutionalization or if anyone can find belonging in such places, her deeper concerns rose to the surface. Was institutionalization a substitute for the child welfare system? Could institutionalization punish those who "acted out"? As someone who happened to be in foster care, she recognized her parallel vulnerabilities. Although her analysis

is still a fledgling one, her questions indicate the promise of this sort of documentary. *The Freedom Tour* exposes the stories of oppressed people so that others may witness and identify points of commonality.

Another in our group, a young woman labeled with a developmental disability, laughed and cried along with the audience. She echoed the audience's expressions of shock and sorrow. But her words betrayed a distance from the individuals whose stories were projected on the screen. "It's too bad disabled people suffered. It was wrong": the right sentiment, but no trace of identification or solidarity. "It's good that they got out. They should close the institutions." Again, these are the words People First wants us to hear and share. However as our discussion continued, it became clear she didn't see herself implicated in the stories we heard in the documentary.

The Freedom Tour still has some distance to travel and it may need to pick up some more passengers along the way. Going beyond the documentary itself, how will the tour help young people like these see their connection with the stories of survivors? This is especially important today, when there is a new generation of young people with intellectual disabilities who rightfully expect to take their place in the community as free and autonomous citizens. Institutionalization is not part of their past, nor may it be part of their imagined life horizons. As a corollary, what can I, as a parent and ally, do to help people with developmental disabilities see their shared situation. Is it possible to help our daughter recognize her shared history with those in *The Freedom Tour*, despite the differences in the details of their lives? Her own situation is so precarious. With the closing of the large residential institutions for people with developmental disabilities in Ontario, one dismal option is removed. But in its place are group homes—some which may have transplanted and condensed the staff, procedures and philosophy from larger institutions into smaller settings. More distressing, prison or psychiatric facilities have their doors open, waiting for those who cannot find another place in the community. Closing one set of institutions may simply fill another.

Just as the documentary needs to embrace all people with developmental disabilities, its reach

must extend beyond the disability community. This is best and perhaps unintentionally reflected in the documentary's title. *The Freedom Tour* plays on the phrase *Freedom Summer*, the civil rights action in which young white college students volunteered in the summer of 1964 to protest the racist treatment of African-Americans. Busloads of young people traveled across the country to the Deep South to register African-Americans for the vote. Although Freedom Summer ended within a few months, it tangibly and symbolically transformed the situation of all Americans.

One strength of the Freedom Summer action was its ability to bring together people from different, even contesting walks of life into solidarity. Freedom Summer succeeded precisely because people set aside their prejudices and preconceptions of one another for a time.

It's not clear that a similar reach across difference happened in *The Freedom Tour*. Only a handful of racialized or indigenous people appear on the screen. Although all those appearing in the documentary were clearly disenfranchised, they seemed to reflect a narrow band of experience. That said, one Aboriginal woman makes connections to her experience in residential schools that potentially draws alliances between all incarcerated peoples.

Another instance in which diversity is missed is in the assumed heterosexuality of all those in institutions. Repeatedly survivors and their families disclose stories of sexual abuse and rape both by staff and between residents. As one survivor, David states "*When the lights went out, boys just started sleep with other boys. It was horrible.*" Certainly the lack of privacy, confinement and forced congregation in communal sleeping and shower areas is "horrible," even if one is not the direct target of sexual contact. However, I spoke to several people who were disquieted by the documentary's tendency to assume all sexual contact within institutions was forced. There is little room in survivor stories for understanding some of the sexual and physical contact as consensual expressions of intimacy.

Historically, racialized and LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) peoples have been institutionalized alongside labeled people. The movement to close institutions will only be strengthened by recognizing the experiences of

all incarcerated people. Part of this recognition depends upon noting the differences between us. We must document how institutionalization robbed Aboriginal and racialized people of their cultural heritage and connection with their communities of origin. We must speak to the ways in which residential institutions for people with developmental disabilities were and may continue to be part of a larger agenda of racist eugenics that is implicated in, but operates separately from systemic ableism. Similarly, we must recognize that people of all sexual orientations were trapped within institutions. We must leave space for the possible avenues which people imagined, sought out and grasped for any chance for personhood and self-expression, including through their sexuality. We must recognize that the punishment for non-normative sexual orientation was institutionalization, and that maintaining one's full humanity would necessarily involve acting on desire. In order to see the way forward—to secure freedom for all people—we must hold the tension between condemning social wrongs and honouring unique and transgressive acts of survival.

The Freedom Tour brings us into the places where no one should ever be. Here's hoping that it doesn't stop traveling and that we're with them at their next destination.

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