

## Woodlands memorial taking shape

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Construction can be found on almost every corner of the Woodlands property in New Westminster. The former 65-acre site for the Woodlands School is quickly transforming into Victoria Hill, a planned residential development that will one day be home to 3,000 people. The modern community will feature apartment towers, townhomes and services supporting the new residents.

Construction is also nearing completion on a memorial to remember Woodlands' former residents.

The site was once the location of Woodlands School, for those with developmental disabilities. Former patients were buried in a cemetery on the site, but that cemetery was unceremoniously torn down in 1976. It's location was redeveloped into a park and the graves were forgotten.

Now, the Woodlands Memorial Gardens are being built to remember those patients.

From 1926 to 1957 an estimated 3,000 people died in Woodlands, a provincial government institution for the developmentally disabled. If the bodies of those who died in care were unclaimed, they were buried in the graveyard. After 1958 the unclaimed bodies were sent to the University of B.C., where they were used as cadavers.

When the Woodlands graveyard was dismantled in 1976, some of the grave markers were used in a barbecue patio used by Woodlands staff, while others were found in a retaining wall that lined a nearby creek. It's believed some of the concrete markers were hauled away and used in other construction projects.

"The decision was made to close the site for future burial and to remove the headstones," said Erik Lees, the landscape architect who designed the memorial.

"The reason they were removed, the story goes, is the administrator of the [nearby seniors] hospital felt that it was not healthy for the residents of the hospital to be looking down on headstones. The other reason they may have been removed, and this is not uncommon in North America, is they may have been removed for maintenance purposes."

The memorial, built over two acres, will remember patients and also serve as a reminder of how our thinking has changed and those with development disabilities are no longer institutionalized.



**Architect Erik Lees stands in front of one of the memorial walls that make up the Woodlands Memorial Gardens, a new memorial remembering those who died while housed at the former Woodlands School.**

Several years ago, advocates for former patients and volunteers began exploring the Woodlands site, which had been closed in 1996, looking for the graveyard. Volunteers found more than 500 grave markers, which are now being incorporated into the memorial gardens. While not all of the markers have been found, the memorial will still include the names of all of those they know were buried there.

"Since we don't have precise records or maps of where each grave is, we felt it was inappropriate to repatriate the headstones to their exact locations. So we've created a series of memorial walls that have all of the 500 headstones mounted in them," said Lees.

"Regardless of the size, shape or integrity of the stone, every piece of every headstone is now mounted in an honourable, meaningful way within these walls," he explained.

Advocates and former patients were driven to repatriate the site after a 2001 review of the Woodlands School by the provincial ombudsman found incidents of physical and sexual abuse of patients by staff had occurred.

"The residents shared their experience with us," said Lees about the consultation that took place prior to the memorial being designed. "They told us a lot of stories about what took place and they didn't hold back. There were many tears brought to the surface as a result of recounting those memories and those stories."

While the two-acre memorial site is not expected to be completed until next month, that hasn't stopped former residents and their loved ones from visiting. The memorial is split but connected with walkways. The west side contains memorials where the grave stones and names of those buried there are displayed.

The east end of the site is much more symbolic. There's a large black window frame but the window sill is so high that you can't see out of it.

"That's a component we call 'A window too high.' That goes back to a story that came out a number of years ago. Many [former patients] recalled how that as kids they couldn't see out of the windows. The windows were just not designed to see out of," explained Lees.

"Right away people recognize that element [of the memorial design] and they go up and they touch it. The reaction to that has been very powerful. There's a reflecting pond in front of it that reflects the image of 'A window too high.' From a metaphoric and experiential point of view, it's proven to be a real touchstone for the site."

There are about 3,200 names that are represented in the east side of the memorial. The graveyard was used for Woodlands patients, as well as those from Essondale in Coquitlam (A hospital for the mentally ill that was later renamed Riverview).

"Every single person buried here will have their name represented on a series of black granite panels," said Lees. "We felt it was important and the advocates felt it was important that everyone buried here is honoured in some way."

- The Woodlands Memorial Gardens are expected to be completed by late November. The official opening of it will be held in the spring. For updates on the memorial, go online to [www.bcacl.org/woodlands\\_cemetery](http://www.bcacl.org/woodlands_cemetery).

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