

PREFACE

A piece of work like this book is the combined efforts of a number of people.

First is Chelsea Comeau who took my idea and story line and shaped it into what you are reading today.

Next are Planned Lifetime Advocacy Networks (PLAN) and the Jack Collins Fund whose resources and efforts helped cover the cost of printing and distribution of the book.

Finally I would like to thank my wife Wendy for her continued support of this project and for being the woman I love and cherish.

Phil Allen

My name is Phil Allen. I was born in the prairie province called Saskatchewan, and from the earliest I can remember, I was under the government's care. A few things I can tell you about myself, right off the bat are that I collect stamps, I really love Star Trek, and I was born with



1. Phil Allen was born in Saskatchewan and lived with different foster families.

a disability. I've been married to my wife, Wendy, for almost 26 years, and I have two sisters in Saskatchewan. I never knew my

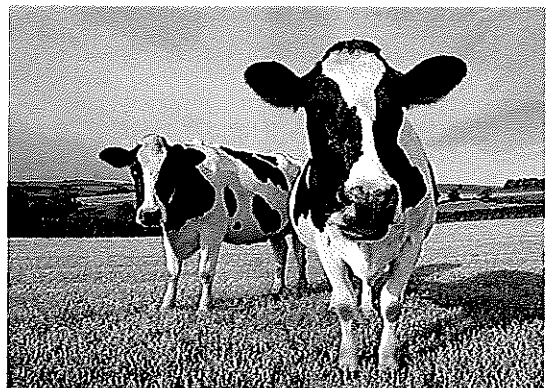
biological mother or father, but that's all right, because I love the

people who are in my life. The first house I remember living in was a great, big house, and I was there for about seven or eight years. There were a couple of nice ladies

who looked after me, and I played with a girl across the street.

When I was young, I moved in with a family with whom I lived for many years. They were named the Pinch family, and the first farm on which we lived had an enormous barn. I remember the barn most clearly. Isn't it funny how memories work? Even when they're very old, the simplest of details will stay with you forever. It's been decades, and I still remember that barn.

After my family decided to sell the first house, we moved to a second farm. It was on a property that spanned two acres, and sat in a small town between Moose Jaw and



2. One of the farms Phil lived on had cows which were used for beef and milk.

Regina. My foster father had horses on this farm, and chickens and pigs and turkeys.

He also had twenty or thirty cows, some of which were for milking, though most were taken in the Fall for beef. My father worked night and day on that farm. Once, he was working so hard outside that there was an accident and he stripped all the skin right off his hand.

Not everyone realizes how dangerous farms can be. There was even a fire in the kitchen once, and we all had to get out of the house, but the fire was put out and everyone was safe.

I remember a windmill on the second farm, too. It was next to the barn, and it turned round and round, and I remember planting trees when we first moved because we

needed them to protect us from the raging winds. The winds get real bad in the prairies.

The winters in Saskatchewan were terrible, too. So terrible, in fact, that my father had to tie a rope from our front door to the door of the barn just so we could find our way in the storms.

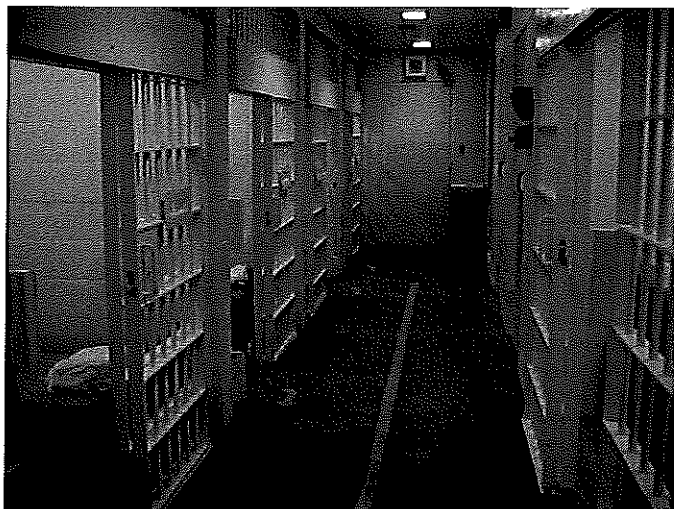
We went to a dance hall for a winter party one year, and an awful snowstorm came down on us; we had to take the horses and wagon back home and my mother covered us kids with blankets in the back. She drove the horses through the storm, but they knew exactly where to go. Animals are extraordinary like that.

When I moved from that farm to a new home, I didn't like the people there so much. I was placed with a British

family who pronounced things strangely, and it was hard for me to understand them. When they gave me a tour of the place, they kept telling me about the “*gare-idge*”, and I had no idea what they were talking about until they showed me the garage.

When the British family moved back to England, I stayed in Saskatchewan and started working in town. That’s how foster families work. You don’t always get to stay with the ones you like, and even the ones you aren’t so happy with will leave your life eventually. It’s something you get used to, and live with, because there isn’t time to be sad in life.

The government decided that I was a nuisance now that I wasn't living with a family, and because I was under the government's care, they could do whatever they wanted with me. A detective came and picked me up and put me



3. After working in town for a while, Phil was picked up by a detective and put in jail for the night.

in jail overnight. To this day, I couldn't tell you why they put me in jail. I never hurt anybody, I never did anything wrong,

but they locked me

up for the night before taking me to an institution in Moose Jaw the next day. I was locked up in that institution for ten years.

Back then, institutions for people with disabilities were a place that you didn't really know much about unless you lived or worked in one. I lived in that institution for a decade, and I would never wish that experience on anyone.

A lot of things went on in there.... *Everything* went on in there.

They called it a school, but we didn't learn anything, and the only thing they taught us there was how to feel forgotten.



4. Phil was taken from the jail to an institution. He lived there for ten years before walking out and going to British Columbia.

There were children left in corners, crying and sometimes even naked. The staff sat there and laughed at us when we cried, and when new staff members came and tried to help us, the old ones told them not to bother. We were beyond all hope, they thought, not worth helping or caring for.

The girls lived on one side of the building, the boys on the other. Sometimes, they would hold dances, and that was the only time we ever saw the girls, or were allowed contact with them.

Some of the kids wet and soiled themselves because no one would take them to the lavatory, and the mess would just sit there on the floor and on their clothes. We were ignored and mistreated and some of the residents even died in that place because they weren't taken care of.

Our beds were lined up in rows, all in one great big room, with little side tables between each one, and there was never any privacy. It was like being in the army, being told when and what to eat, never having a moment to ourselves. In a different building was the kitchen, and one big dining room. In the morning we lined up and got our food and went to sit down and eat.

The government didn't know what was going on in there. When they sent someone to come and check on things, all our dirty bed sheets were changed and we were lined up in fresh, clean clothes. We were only allowed to say "hello" if we were spoken to, and if someone asked how we liked living in the institution, we had to say everything was just fine. If we dared to speak up and try to

tell the truth, we were locked in little side rooms as punishment and left there.

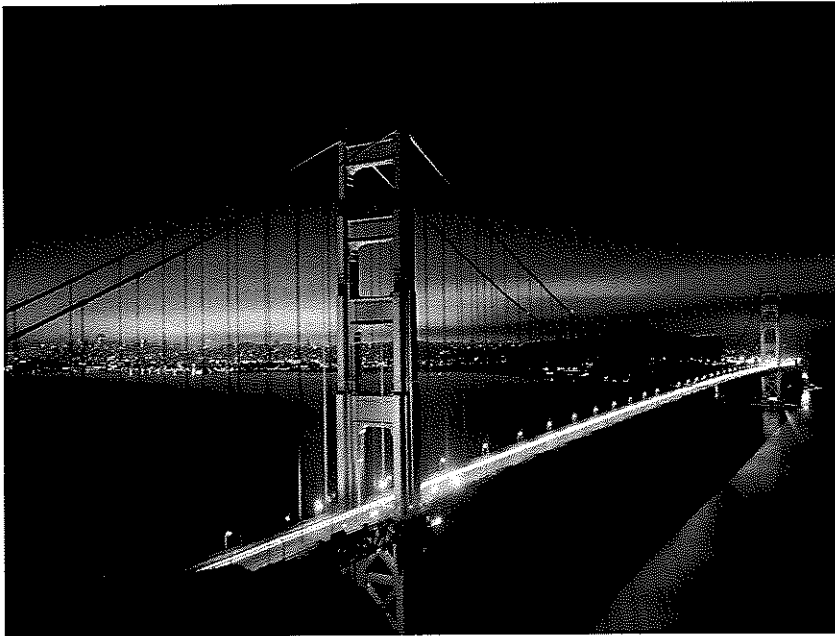
When the government officials left, it all went back to the way it had been. The sheets were dirty again, and we put our old clothes back on. Things went on like that for years.

Families were told not to bother coming to see the children because it would interfere with progress, and when someone's supposed to be a professional, you believe them. You listen to what they're telling you, because they should know best, and why would they lie to you?

Sometimes we were given cards, passes to walk around outside the institution. It was an entirely different world out there; walking and being allowed to breathe in

fresh air is something people can't really appreciate until they've been denied that simple right.

In my spare time, I learned how to make flowers out of paper. Keeping busy made time crawl a little faster.



And the institution was the kind of place where you

5. Phil passed time in the institution by learning to build things. He used a picture of the Golden Gate Bridge as a reference for a model he made.

had to learn to take something

ordinary and make it beautiful.

I had a small picture of the Golden Gate Bridge, and I decided, one day, to make a model of it. I made a six foot

drawing of it first, planned it out carefully, and then over a period of three months I built the bridge out of small wooden sticks. I liked to build things, so I created other projects. I made flower boxes in the workshop, and benches and tables and chairs. I worked in the kitchen for a while, too.

But I really couldn't stand it there. I talked about leaving for a long time until I decided that I just couldn't do it anymore. I got a card to go outside, and I walked away. I just went out the doors and kept going and I'll never go back to that place.

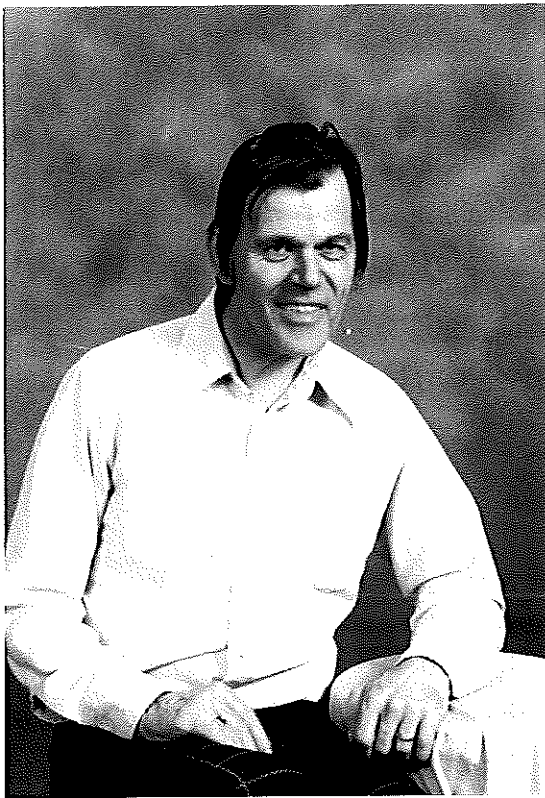
I've seen enough of it.

I hitchhiked to a place called Greenway, got onto a train and went to a hotel. To be able to sleep in a room that

was my own, to be able to close my eyes and not be afraid... I can't tell you how that felt.

After I escaped, I met someone who asked if I wanted to work on a railroad in a place called British Columbia.

Within two months, I had left Saskatchewan, and was in



B.C.

It was hard for me in the beginning because everyone spoke Italian. Only my boss could speak to me, but I made the most of it, and did what I had to do because I was grateful to be in a new place where I wasn't locked up.

6. After moving to British Columbia, Phil began working and lived in Vancouver.

I came into Vancouver when I was done working on the railroad, and stayed with a friend until I got a job. I lived in two different places on 4th Avenue in Vancouver. I met a friend there, and lived in an apartment for a long time.

While I was living there, I met a group of hippies. I'd heard a lot of bad things about hippies, but I



7. In Vancouver, Phil met a group of hippies who were very kind to him, and not at all the bad people others made them out to be.

spent time with them at the coffee shop they had, and all they did was get together to have tea and coffee and talk about things. They kept the place clean, and they never

offered me any dope. People said hippies were no good,
but they

were good. They were very kind people, and they were
never mean to me. Kindness counts for a lot in life. One
day when I was sitting in the coffee shop, a girl came and
sat down next to me, and the strangest thing happened. All
I had to do was look at her, and I suddenly knew
everything about her without asking her a single question.
It was the only time this had ever happened to me, and I
still don't know how to explain it, but I suddenly knew all
about this girl and where she was from and what she'd done
in her life, just by sitting next to her. I recited it all to her,
everything I saw and knew, and she said I was right. I
don't know which one of us was more surprised by it. It's
never happened to me since, but it's another one of those

things that I'll never be able to forget because it was truly remarkable. I never saw her again, and I don't know what happened to her, but she'll be a part of my life, in a way, forever.

From 4th Avenue, I moved to 1st Avenue, and built a suite in the basement of a house. It took a few months, but I put up the walls, built it all myself.

I met a friend, while I was living on 1st, who got me a job putting in wall heaters. I had to install tubes through the radiators, and the work was good enough. I was there for about a year until I cut the top of my finger off putting in one of the tubes. I was taken to the hospital, where I sat and waited from 6pm to 4am, because the nurse wouldn't

go get the doctor. By the time the doctor finally saw me, he was real mad at the nurse for not getting him sooner.

The doctor sewed up my finger, but I've got no nerves in the end of it now, and the fingernail grows a little crookedly.

I got laid off because of the injury, and was on welfare for a bit. I didn't like being on welfare, but I had no choice. When I went in to collect it, they called me up



8. Because of an injury, Phil went on welfare for a few months, which he didn't like because he was treated as a number, not a person.

with a number first, before using my name, and I really hated that.

“I’m not a number, I’m a

person,” I’d tell them. But they didn’t care, and you had to do what you were told to do.

After a few months on welfare, I worked in a warehouse, then at the Salvation Army sorting clothes. I wasn’t a number anymore, which was nice, and I was keeping myself busy with work, but these jobs didn’t last as long, and I was still looking for something I could stick with.

Eventually, I found a new job through a friend washing and cleaning cars on Broadway, in East Vancouver. I worked at that job for fourteen years. Sometimes cars came in that needed to be polished, but they didn’t have enough paint on them. I warned my boss, but he told me to polish them anyway, and, sure enough,

the paint came off. They didn't listen to me there, sometimes, but I enjoyed the work anyway. I never had to worry about people calling me names or anything like that, and they didn't care what I looked like, which was really nice. It was hard to find places like that, where people didn't stare at me, and make a point of noticing my disability.

On Saturday and Sunday afternoons, I would go down Granville Street and look at all the different stores. I really liked going down there on the weekends, but I was always getting harassed by the police. Every block, a different policeman would come up to me and ask me who I was, and what I was doing. They asked me if I was on drugs, because I limp a little when I walk, and my eyes have a tendency to roll up sometimes.

But those policemen were just assuming things unfairly about me and they didn't really understand.

People used to cross the street to avoid walking by me. They stared at me, and, honestly, it was really embarrassing. I never did anything wrong to them, but they still stared at me, and sometimes they laughed and called me names. They didn't understand either.

I was tired of being stopped by the police all the time, tired of being accused of things and questioned every block I walked. So I went to my doctor and had him write me a note explaining that I had a disability, and I took the letter to the head of the police department. They read that letter and the problems ended. I wasn't bothered by the police again, but it's kind of a shame that it took a doctor's note to put a stop to everything.

Even though the police weren't bothering me anymore, people in the community still were. I used to go to restaurants downtown, and once when I went to sit at a bar, I sat down between two men, and they got up to move a seat over so they wouldn't have to sit next to me. There was no reason for it. People thought things about me when



9. Phil faced discrimination because of his disability, including an incident where a restaurant owner in Chinatown yelled and swore at him.

they really didn't know me at all.

In Chinatown, a man working in a

restaurant even

started swearing

at me, thinking I was high or drunk, and I never went back to that restaurant again.

I did meet a very nice woman on Granville Street,
though, and I used to walk around with her a lot.
Eventually, I lived with her for about six months, but things
didn't work out all the time. I used to sit and wait for two
hours for her to get her make-up on, and it really started to
bug me. I finally got fed up with it and we went our
separate ways. That's how life goes, sometimes, but, like I
said before, there's not a lot of time to be sad. The years
pass you by quicker than you realize.

Before I knew it, it was time for me to retire, and my
job cleaning and polishing cars came to an end. But there
was still so much to be experienced.

* * *

Some people might get bored when they aren't working, but I found that life can still be pretty exciting after you've retired. A friend of mine invited me to a party one night, and I really enjoy being around people, and socializing, so I went.



I met a woman at the party named Wendy, and it was love at first sight.

10. Phil met a woman named Wendy at a friend's party, and it was love at first sight. People think

that that kind of thing doesn't exist, but it does.

At the time, I was living on 18th and Commercial in Vancouver, and Wendy was living on Lochdale in North Burnaby. The streets in her area were really dark at night,

because there were no lights there. I used to go and visit her a lot, and if I missed my bus home, I had to wait there a long time before the next one came.

We decided to move in together, and her mother was very unhappy about it. She said that we shouldn't be living together without getting married, so on June 2nd, 1984, Wendy and I were married in a Catholic church in Vancouver.



11. After moving in together, Phil and Wendy got married on June 2, 1984.

It was a real nice wedding, and lots of people came. We went back to Wendy's parents' place afterwards and

had a party. Not everyone who went to the wedding came back to the house, but it was still a very nice party with food and gifts.

We went to a hotel on Burrard Street for our honeymoon. Wendy's godfather paid for it, and we spent two nights there on the 18th floor. One of our favourite parts was going out onto the balcony; the city was so beautiful and we could see so much of it. It really was a wonderful honeymoon.

When we left the hotel we went back to Wendy's parents' place to pick up all our presents, and then went home to start our life together as a married couple.

Wendy and I lived together on Sussex, behind
Metrotown mall, before moving to Tilford, where we lived
for many years. From there we moved to our apartment on
Kingsway, where
we still live now.

We both really
like our apartment
on Kingsway.



**12. Phil and Wendy lived in a few places together
before settling in an apartment on Kingsway.**

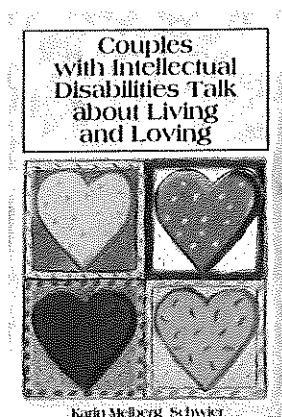
We've had a lot of
friends here who've

come and gone. I suppose there's been about ten of our
friends who have passed away while we've lived in this
place, which is how life goes, I guess.

* * *

I've realized over time, that a lot of people don't expect individuals with disabilities to get married and maintain successful relationships. I think that's really unfair, because we all fall in love just like everybody else.

In the late nineties, a woman named Karin MelbergSchweir wanted to tell the world the same thing;



she wanted others to know that people with disabilities are just as capable of having relationships and getting married and even having children. Karin came to

13. Phil and Wendy were interviewed for a book, in which they talked about their marriage.

interview Wendy and I for a book she was writing called Couples with Intellectual

Disabilities Talk About Living and Loving.

Wendy and I told her a lot of things, like what we do for each other in our marriage.

We talked about how we met at the party, and how it was love at first sight. There were people from all over the world who were interviewed, and Wendy and I still have a copy of it now. We're real proud of that book.

* * *

As you can probably tell, my family and friends are very important to me. They're a huge part of my life. It was after about fourteen years of living on Kingsway that I decided I wanted to enquire about my biological family back in Saskatchewan. I didn't know if anyone would reply, but I contacted an agency in Regina, and when I received a response, I discovered that I had two sisters. I was given their contact information, and we began talking on the phone.

Through our conversations, I found out that they both lived in small prairie towns in Saskatchewan which were smaller than Burnaby, and had much smaller populations than a town like Regina.

They were very excited to learn all about me, and to hear about my life, because we knew nothing about each other. Our back-and-forth correspondence continued for a little while before Wendy and I finally got to go visit. A few organizations for people with disabilities helped pay for our plane tickets.

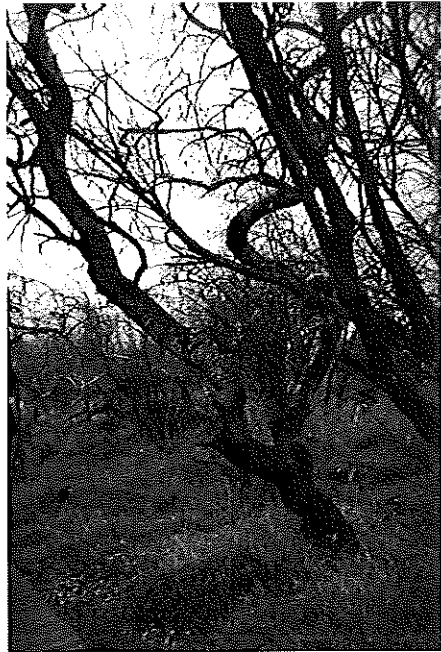
Can you imagine? Returning to the province I'd not visited since leaving when I was a young man, meeting a family I didn't even know existed until a short time before?... It was quite extraordinary and exciting.

My sisters, Eileen and Leona, picked us up at the airport, and they were so very happy to see us. We picked up our luggage and went to the car. It was October, and the weather was nice, not too cold like it can get in Saskatchewan.

We spent two weeks there, one week with Eileen and her husband Ron, and the other with Leona and her husband Bert. We had a Thanksgiving dinner at Ron and Eileen's. My mother wasn't there because she had passed away by that time. I never got to know her, but I do have a picture of her, and that will last forever.

My family really loved Wendy, too; we all got along very well. At Ron and Eileen's huge house, there was a great big upstairs, and a basement and a separate shower downstairs.

My sisters took us somewhere different almost every single day we were there. We went to car museums, and saw mighty, wild buffalo, but one of my favourite parts was when we stopped in between Saskatoon and Regina and saw the most unusual trees



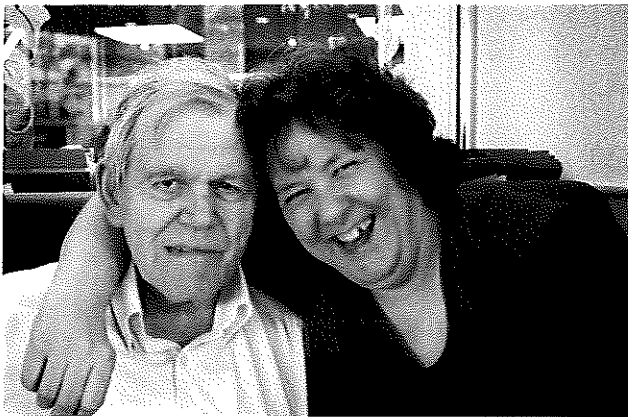
imaginable. They were all tangled together, growing crookedly, and intertwined with one another, like they needed each other to live. I'd never seen anything like it.

14. During their trip to Saskatchewan to meet Phil's biological family, Phil and Wendy saw amazing trees that they had never seen before.

It was really an unforgettable vacation, and I'm so grateful to have met my sisters.

* * *

Our trip to Saskatchewan was not the only time we would get to see my sisters, luckily. Last year, Wendy and I had our twenty-fifth anniversary party. Over fifty people were there, and we received lots of presents and cards.



Eileen and Leona came from Saskatchewan for the party, and Wendy's three sisters, and her

15. Last year, Phil and Wendy celebrated their 25th anniversary.

mother and father came,

as well. Wendy's two godmothers and her godfather were there, and lots of our friends came.

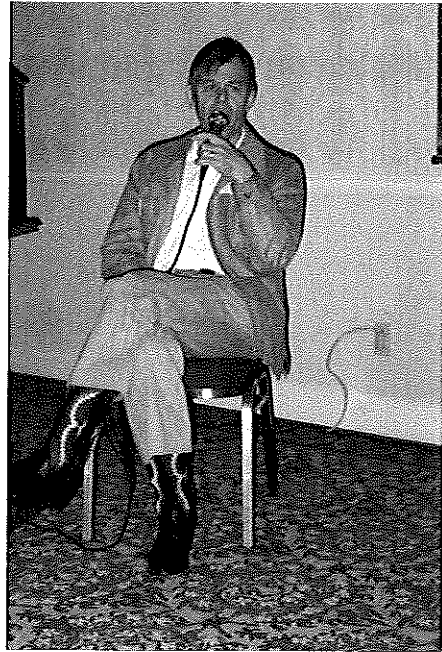
We'd made invitations with our wedding picture on them, and all the important information for the party. Even friends from our church were invited.

It was a potluck type of gathering, so everyone brought some food to share, and we all had a really good time.

* * *

The world has changed a lot since I was born, especially how it views people with disabilities. I've gone from living in an institution, and being made fun of, to finding support in an organization called PLAN. They provide Wendy and me with a network of friends, and a facilitator who comes to see us and helps us with things. There weren't groups like PLAN when I was younger, and there are many more opportunities now for people with disabilities.

I've done a lot of public speaking about my past, and about disability issues and relationships. I've been going to Douglas College for over ten years now to speak to Child, Family, and Community Studies students. I share my story with them and give them advice about supporting people with disabilities, because sometimes the most important knowledge doesn't have to come from a textbook.



16. Over the years, Phil has been a guest speaker at places like Douglas College and UBC.

I also used to go with a friend of mine, Al Etmanski, to the University of British Columbia to speak to teachers. They used to be really surprised when I talked about my marriage to Wendy, instead of talking about disability.

Even though some attitudes towards people with disabilities are a lot different than they used to be, there's still progress to be made. This book is my way of showing others that individuals who have disabilities are just like everyone else; they have jobs and families and people they love, and they are capable of doing truly incredible things.

This story is about me and my life and the important things that I have done, and I hope that it will inspire you to take the time to discover others' stories.

There are wonderful things out there for you to learn, and all you need to do is listen.

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