

Lives transformed: COMMUNITIES OF COMPASSION / By living with the mentally handicapped in L'Arche homes, non-disabled helpers say they learn the most profound lesson of all -- how to be fully human

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Byline: Liane Faulder

EDMONTON -- There is something soothing about being around Richard Hinds. He makes eye contact when he shakes your hand, but doesn't try to impress with a rock-hard grip. His grasp is warm, the skin on his palms is soft.

As he sits on the couch, Richard agrees, with an affable shrug, to answer a few questions. Around him, people chatter and fuss. The sound of dinner preparations rattles from the kitchen. Nearby, a string of Christmas lights tacked along the ceiling blinks merrily.

But Richard pays no attention to these things. He waits, his gaze mild behind his wire-rimmed glasses, his hands resting on his thighs, as if he is quite sure things will unfold as they should.

Perhaps this has been Richard's experience. For although he is mentally handicapped, and in some ways quite helpless, Richard has had a profound influence on the fate of at least one other person. For Hiro Watanabe, meeting Richard changed everything.

Once a travel agent living in Japan, Hiro ran into Richard 10 years ago at a Lake Louise hostel where both of them happened to be staying while on holiday. The day stands out in Hiro's mind, clear as the mountain air that surrounded it.

He was at the tail end of a year-long trip around the world. Tired and a bit lonely, Hiro was preparing a meal of noodles and tuna in the hostel's community kitchen when he was approached by a slight, middle-aged man.

"Hello, my friend," said Richard to Hiro.

And so began their relationship.

Richard asked Hiro to dine with him and his fellow travellers, a group of mentally handicapped people and their caretakers united under the name of L'Arche, an international organization that has transformed the way the intellectually disabled live.

Touched and somewhat taken aback by the offer, Hiro agreed. Luckily, one of the group members was Japanese and could translate. Hiro spent the entire evening with the L'Arche contingent.

Later, back home in Japan, Hiro realized that being with the L'Arche group had made him happy. He quit his travel agent job and began working in an institution for people with developmental disabilities. Three years later, he left friends and family to move to Edmonton and work with L'Arche, which often hires international workers through a special agreement with the federal government.

"Before I met him, I was only seeing one part of the world," Hiro says of Richard. "But he showed me another part of the world, which is wider."

L'Arche, the French word for ark, was founded in France in 1964 by Canadian theologian and philosopher Jean Vanier. Like Noah's Ark, the organization is a symbol of deliverance. L'Arche hopes to change society by showing that people of all different descriptions can live together in love and hope.

Devotees of the L'Arche philosophy, whose reach extends to more than 120 communities worldwide, believe the mentally handicapped have special gifts to offer non-handicapped people. This ethos of learning from one another is so strong within L'Arche circles that those who care for the "core members" all live and work in the same home together, like a family. For L'Arche workers, known as assistants, it's more than a job. It's a calling.

Everything known about Richard's history before L'Arche is summarized in three paragraphs on file at the organization's Edmonton office. Born in 1947, Richard was admitted at the age of six to the Michener Centre in Red Deer, where people with developmental disabilities have lived since 1922.

"No previous history was recorded," reads Richard's background sheet, and "Richard has not had any family contact."

For nearly 40 years, Richard lived at Michener Centre. In 1991, he moved into Heiwa House, one of five homes in Edmonton and Sherwood Park that are among nearly 200 homes and day programs run nationwide by L'Arche, which has been at the forefront of helping the mentally handicapped live outside of institutions.

During the day, Richard attends a day program and does volunteer work at places like the YMCA. Then he rides a DATS bus home to enjoy the companionship of three other core members and three assistants. Everyone gathers around the dining room table to talk about their day.

The table, says Grant Kaminski, L'Arche Edmonton's executive director, is an important part of each L'Arche home. After 3:30 p.m., it is set up for tea. As the core members return, assistants are there to pour, to offer cookies, and to listen.

"Some core members are tired and anxious and others need to speak about their day, something that happened that they want to share," says Grant.

About 5 p.m., the table is set for dinner. Grant says that often the homes invite guests to share the evening meal. After supper, core members may go with assistants to a movie or to a prayer night. L'Arche is a Christian organization -- this year the Edmonton and District Council of Churches is giving all its Christmas collection money to L'Arche -- but it welcomes participants of all faiths.

Once a month, L'Arche hosts a social night that's open to the public. On Christmas Eve, there is a community party, called a reveillon, with core members taking turns playing Santa.

"Maybe half of our community has family and for the other half, we are the only family they have," says Grant. "Reveillon is the only celebration, and the gift they receive may be the only gift they get at Christmas."

Regardless of the good work that staff and volunteers do for core residents with L'Arche, Grant says the group's founder, Vanier, insists that people with disabilities are the leaders of the community. "What we have to do is to learn from them," says Grant. "And then we discover that the marginalized, the sometimes-thrown-away in society, are, in fact, the people who have lots to teach us."

Richard, says Grant, teaches others in his community about the importance of offering a warm welcome to friends and strangers alike. A tour of Heiwa House offers evidence of Richard's generous spirit. As Hiro points out, the outside of residents' bedroom doors are brightly decorated with drawings, courtesy of Richard. Whenever a core member or an assistant goes away, Richard prepares a special surprise upon their return. He tapes a sign to their doors, scribbled all over with the initial 'R' for Richard.

"This is his way of welcoming people," says Hiro, 37. "That is Richard's gift."

Richard sits quietly on the couch while Grant and Hiro chat about him and L'Arche. He seems to catch the gist of what's being said. Grant and Hiro mention a new book about L'Arche, launched the previous weekend at Chapters. All three men were at the launch.

"Good time on the weekend," says Richard, and he pats Hiro on the knee.

It's Friday evening. To unwind, Richard and Hiro walk a few blocks from their home in the Capilano area to a local coffee shop. Though they live in the same home, the two don't spend as much time together as they used to. When Hiro first came to Edmonton, he was an assistant, living and working in the same home as Richard.

Though the assistants get three hours off in the afternoon while core members are out of the house, it is a demanding job. Assistants are like parents, providing virtually all the care for their charges, including house cleaning, cooking and personal care. For this they're paid between \$640 and \$1,050 a month, get free room and board and a month's vacation each year.

Most L'Arche assistants live in the community's homes, unless they are married or have children, when they often move into their own places. L'Arche assistants must commit to spending a year within the program, which has been running in the Edmonton area for 33 years. The average stay is two or three years.

With seven years of service, Hiro is one of the long-term members of the L'Arche community. After spending his first four years in Canada at Heiwa House, he needed a change. Since then, Hiro has lived and worked, at least for short periods, in all of the area homes. The provincial government pays for the cost of care for residents in L'Arche homes and the residents, most of whom are on Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped, pay their own room and board.

Recently, Hiro took on a new position with L'Arche, working one-on-one with a handicapped man at a day program. But Hiro still chooses to live within the community, moving back to Heiwa House a few months ago when he took his new job. While other assistants living in the home are still working in the evenings, Hiro's job officially is over for the day. The time he spends with Richard is his own.

Tonight at the coffee shop, the two sit largely in companionable silence. Richard sips his tea and Hiro has a cup of steaming java. At one point, they talk about the mug Hiro is using. Actually, it was a birthday gift from Richard a few years back.

Chuckling, Hiro remembers the L'Arche group had planned a small surprise party for him. One assistant took Richard to buy Hiro a present and while Richard told everyone within earshot that they weren't to say anything about the surprise, he couldn't keep the secret to himself.

"Happy birthday, Hiro," he said the moment he saw his friend that day. "I have a cup for you."

"I pretended I didn't hear him," recalls Hiro.

Hiro admires Richard's exuberant spirit, the way he chats easily with strangers at sports events. When the two go to an Oilers game, Hiro (a huge sports fan) focuses on the play. Richard doesn't know much about hockey. When Hiro asks if he'd like to go to the game, Richard first wants to know whether he can have a hamburger.

"He'll still ask who is winning every so often," says Hiro. "But mostly he talks to the person next to him."

Hiro, who has applied for permanent resident status in Canada, says he hopes to stay working at L'Arche "as long as possible." A marathon runner and triathlete who runs at least 20 kilometres most days, Hiro finds great comfort and satisfaction working with mentally handicapped people. Hiro, a man of few words, appreciates the smiles core members give him.

"It's very simple, but it's very touching to me," he says quietly.

Jean Vanier, who has written some 20 books about L'Arche, notes that developmentally disabled people generally don't care about the trappings of modern culture. Fast cars, nice clothes and fancy titles don't matter to the mentally handicapped. In his book *Encountering the Other*, Vanier recalls the first time he came into contact with a community of developmentally handicapped people more than 40 years ago while visiting a friend who was a priest at an institution in France.

"I was a little bit anxious because I knew how to drive an aircraft carrier, I knew quite a bit about Aristotle, but I knew very little about people with disabilities," writes Vanier, who served in the navy during the Second World War and is the son of Canada's 19th governor-general, Georges Vanier.

But he discovered himself welcomed by the residents at the institution. Vanier found that liberating. L'Arche followers believe that being accepted in this way transforms so-called normal people and helps them to be fully human.

Hiro feels his heart has become more open since coming to L'Arche. "Ten years ago, I didn't care about other people so much," he says. "For example, if you walk around Whyte Avenue, there is a hungry

person and he asks for money. Ten years ago, I didn't care. I kept walking. Now it is nice to stop and talk to them."

Hiro might give panhandlers money, or he might not. But he sees them. He accepts who they are. He puts this down to meeting Richard. Richard, says Hiro, is open to all kinds of different people.

"I think he has no judgments about people. Old people. Young people. Male, female. He doesn't mind," says Hiro, pausing to look at Richard, who nods.

"Good time on the weekend," says Richard.

lfaulder@thejournal.canwest.com