



GBL Architects photo

A rendering of what L'Arche's new building and courtyard could look like. Its former location was old when L'Arche moved in 47 years ago and is being torn down this summer to make space for new homes and programs with double the capacity.

# L'Arche Greater Vancouver takes leap of faith for people with developmental disabilities

By Agnieszka Ruck

**T**hank yous, good-byes, and fond memories were scribbled on the walls inside a pale pink and green facility in Burnaby as people with and without developmental disabilities said farewell to their home of 47 years.

The bittersweet messages were part of the growing pains for L'Arche Greater Vancouver as it embarks on what executive director Denise Haskett calls the biggest dream in the non-profit's history.

The grand plan is to build a fully accessible 52,000 square foot building, doubling current capacity and vastly increasing space for programs. The new facility will include housing for adults with developmental disabilities, units priced below market value for people who choose to live in community with them, and a coffee lounge to engage people from the whole neighbourhood.

L'Arche currently runs four "homes" where a total of 32 people with and without

developmental disabilities live together in family-like settings. They had to be relocated during construction, each community moving to a different house L'Arche owns somewhere in the community.

"You wouldn't know they are L'Arche homes, they are just part of the neighbourhood," said Haskett.

Doubling the non-profit's capacity would mean running homes for an additional 32 people and inviting another 16 to be part of their day programs.

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*It was God that helped us start this community and has given us enough light for each step.*

– Denise Haskett

But with all that comes the sorrow of saying goodbye, the complexity of demolishing a building that was old when L'Arche entered it in the mid-1970s, and the uncertainty of waiting in rented space for about two years while the new facility is built.

"There is an element of grief and letting go of a place that we've been in for 47 years but also an embracing of the change and real excitement for our future," said Haskett.

"What I know about the history of L'Arche – and I've been with the organization

for over 30 years – is that God has always provided. It was God that helped to start this community and has given us enough light for each step and that will continue."

Haskett said while the transition has been a bumpy ride, it has also been a remarkable one. For example, the temporary space they are renting became available in the nick of time and fulfilled all their requirements.

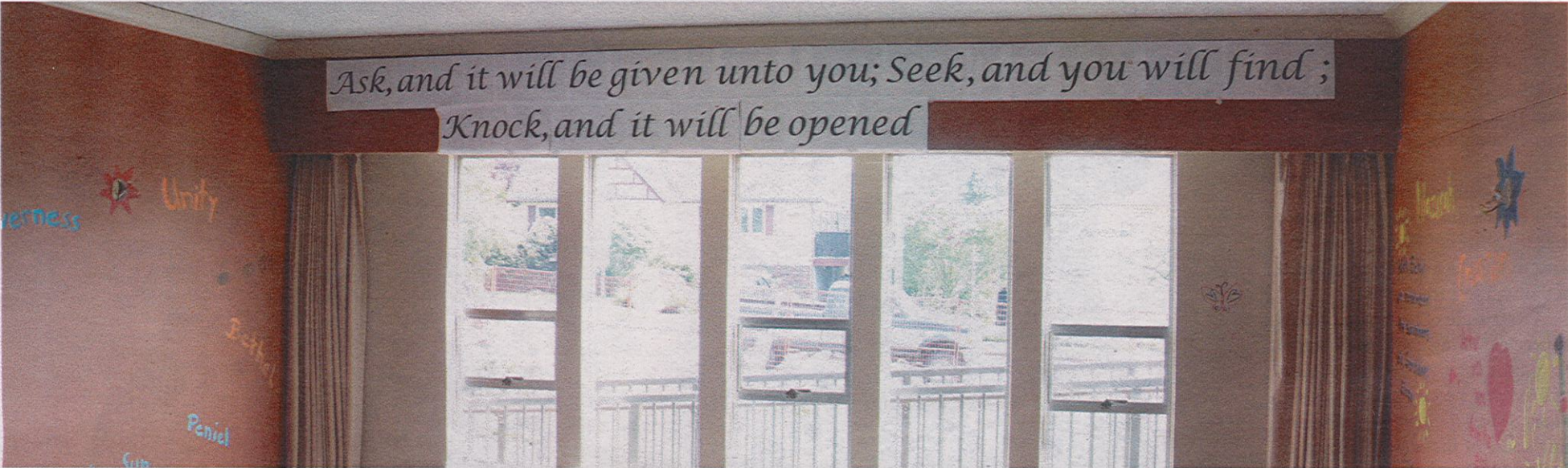
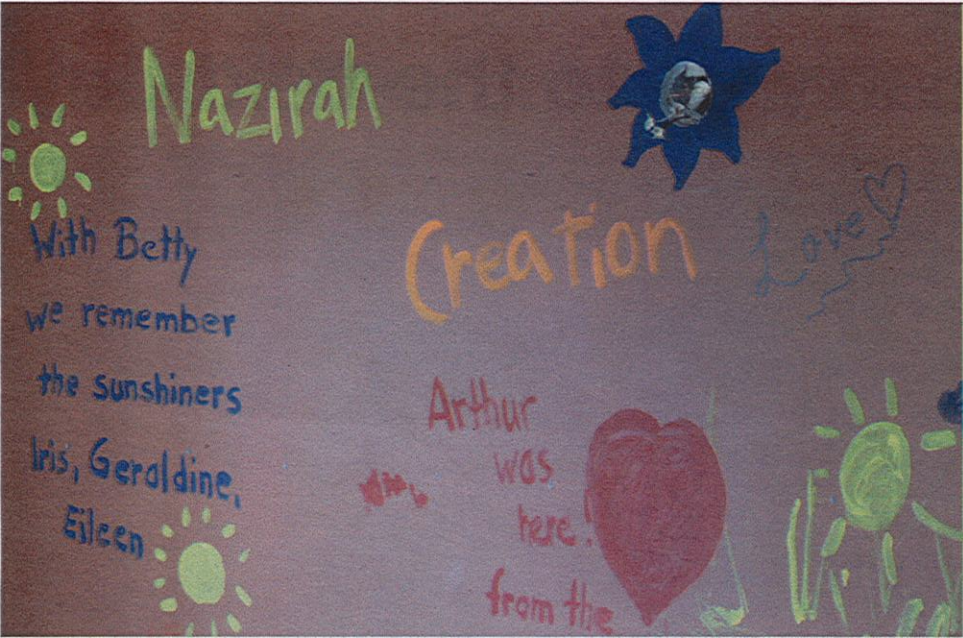
"It was a Godsend to find a place that had offices, a place for our day programs, and storage all at once, and be accessible."

Fourteen staff members now go to work at that temporary location, and they are already dreaming about ways to use the space to begin new programs – perhaps arts and crafts or cooking classes – before the new location is even up and running.

It has taken a leap of faith, making the transition in a time of soaring lumber prices and a pandemic complicating how people run programs, meet, work, and fundraise.

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Messages of gratitude and farewell on the walls and windows of the old L'Arche building at 7401 Sussex Avenue in Burnaby. "So much life happened there," said Haskett.

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Jacqueline Doering, director of development, said L'Arche made the strongest case for potential donors when it could invite them into homes and show their programs in action. Due to pandemic restrictions, "we closed down to the public in March of last year" and "have to do everything by Zoom," she said. "That's a big challenge for sure."

Their capital campaign has so far raised \$3.4 million towards their \$6 million goal.

"We are very grateful to our supporters, our donors," and all those who "share that dream that we have and see the impact of what making this dream a reality will be to a lot of people, especially for people with developmental disabilities and their families."

She said L'Arche's big project touches on several urgent needs in the area, including increasing the number of programs that are fully accessible to people with mobility challenges and responding to an increased demand for programs and different housing models for people with disabilities.

The new facility was also designed to answer societal isolation and loneliness with a neighbourhood coffee shop and a chance to live with or bump into people with various levels of ability.

"It's a testimony of the community that when we are faced with challenges, it brings us all together and helps us find ways to keep the community going," said Doering.

Demolition of the old L'Arche building began in May. Before that organization

moved in nearly five decades ago, it was a home for unwed mothers run by the United Church. *The B.C. Catholic* has covered one woman's story of mistreatment and coercion in that home in 1970 in a series on homes for unwed mothers in Canada.

The Burnaby building with a mixed history was never built to be accessible to people with disabilities. When L'Arche moved in, the root cellar was converted into a chapel and dorm rooms were reconfigured into sections or "homes" of 6-8 people each. The homes operated as their own entities, but with active participation in community life. Some homes had people living there for the whole 47 years.

After L'Arche moved in, "so much life happened there," said Haskett.

Though over the years the building became more dated and a study found it impossible to add an elevator, it was a challenge for some to let go. "We had a time for people to come in and express their thanks for being our home for 47 years," she said.

Earlier this year people arrived on site to say goodbye to the large old tree in the front yard and to write messages of thanks and farewell with markers and paint on the walls.

If everything goes smoothly, she hopes to see a groundbreaking ceremony for the new facility in August and the official start of construction in September. The team hopes to move into a big, bright, new facility by the fall of 2023. □

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