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## **Provocative new book opens doors on life at Alberta’s Michener Centre during province’s eugenics years**

Dr. Claudia Malacrida has thrown the doors open on an era of Alberta’s past that many would prefer to forget. Her new book, *A Special Hell: Institutional Life in Alberta’s Eugenic Years*, talks about life at the infamous Michener Centre from the perspective of people who lived there, worked there and had children institutionalized there.

“This is just a story that has to be told,” says Malacrida. “I teach my students about this and they don’t know we had a eugenics act. Even though people who grew up in Red Deer knew about Michener, they have this kind of clouded view of what happened there.”

Malacrida, a University of Lethbridge sociology professor, became interested in the residents of Michener Centre while working on a book project with the Alberta Association for Community Living when she was a doctoral student.

That project traced the lives of some 40 people and their experiences of living in provincial institutions, including Red Deer’s Michener Centre, established in 1923 for people who were labeled as being ‘mentally defective.’ This label made them vulnerable to Alberta’s eugenics laws allowing forced sterilization of mental defectives, which were in effect from 1928 to 1972.

“I’m interested in Michener primarily because it was the largest feeder for the eugenics program. I began collecting stories and I ended up interviewing 22 survivors, people who had lived there primarily between the ‘50s and the ‘80s,” she says. “All of them left as a result of the deinstitutionalization movement. Many of them were admitted in very early childhood and stayed many decades. It was a hard life and, of those 22, most were sterilized.”

After first being refused a tour by the parent-run board of Michener in 2001, she eventually succeeded in making a visit to the site in 2004 after the facility fell under the purview of Persons with Developmental Disabilities.

“The book traces how it would have been as a child to enter that experience, what kinds of stories were told to kids, what kinds of things brought them to the institution,” she says.

The stories, backed up by archival records, showed that new immigrants were over represented in the institutional population as they found their way into school systems that couldn’t accommodate them. Children who had illnesses like polio that took them out of the school system for several years also couldn’t be accommodated when they were ready to return to school. Many described themselves as being learning disabled. Others were institutionalized because their parents were impoverished or didn’t want them, or because their social or sexual behaviour was judged to be a problem.

Parents were not encouraged to visit their children for a time — some indicated it was a full year — when their child first moved into Michener to provide what the institution claimed was a necessary period of acclimatization.

“Parents were sort of alienated and then to visit your kid in a place like this was just horrific. It was chronically overcrowded, there was no privacy, it stunk of urine and feces as there were some very fragile people who needed a lot of intensive care and didn’t get it,” says Malacrida.

What became obvious through her interviews with survivors is a testament to their capacity for forgiveness.

“All of them were clear that they would never want to go back, that they felt that Michener should be closed, that it was not right what had happened to them, but they never really spoke ill about anybody,” she says.

Michener Centre is not like it was in those days but Malacrida says its physical presence will always serve as a reminder of dark times.

“I realize that Michener is not the place that it was but that is really not the point. As long as there are bricks and mortar there, as long as there is a valuable asset there, then there’s a temptation to exploit it,” she says.

Malacrida’s book is available at the U of L Bookstore, the University of Toronto Press and online at [indigo.ca](http://indigo.ca) and [amazon.com](http://amazon.com).

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**Contact:**

Caroline Zentner, public affairs advisor

403-394-3975 or 403-795-5403

[caroline.zentner@uleth.ca](mailto:caroline.zentner@uleth.ca)

Claudia Malacrida

403-329-2738

[claudia.malacrida@uleth.ca](mailto:claudia.malacrida@uleth.ca)