

*The Donwood Story*

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# *The Donwood Story*



Written by Sarah Klassen







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# Foreword

DONWOOD MANOR BOARD CHAIR



On behalf of the Donwood Board of Directors, I want to commend the Donwood Personal Care Home for exemplary and devoted care to the many seniors who have called Donwood home for the past fifty years. We are blessed indeed to have inherited the legacy of many courageous and visionary individuals working together to provide comfortable, healthy and affordable care and housing to seniors transitioning from independent living.

Seniors have consistently been accommodated with dignity, respect and Christian values at a place where their physical, emotional and spiritual needs were met. Committed and supportive administrators, staff, volunteers, board and constituency have made this fifty-year milestone possible. Government funding has been essential to providing quality service. Thank you to all.

We celebrate, cherish and love all of our seniors at Donwood—their faith stories and wisdom enrich our lives. Our last strategic plan reminds us to “Give careful thought to the paths for your feet and strive to be steadfast in all your ways.” (Proverbs 4:26, paraphrase).

The need for more and better care will grow as the elderly population grows. We want to commit ourselves to facilitate active aging for our future seniors with a generous combination of intellectual engagement, social interaction, adequate funding and spiritual nurture. United we will continue our journey to address the needs of tomorrow’s seniors. All of us must be part of this venture. Bon Voyage and Best Wishes, Donwood.

John Janzen

*Chair, Donwood Manor Board*

# Foreword

DONWOOD MANOR CEO



*Give careful thought to the paths for your feet and be steadfast in all your ways – Proverbs 4:26.*

This is the verse chosen by Donwood's Board and leadership as the underpinning of Donwood's current strategic plan. These words have become a steady guide amidst the complexities of healthcare and seniors housing. As you will read in this book, Donwood's story over the last 50 years captures the changes and transformation, always marked by themes of dedication, determination, community, transition, innovation and opportunity.

While we look back and celebrate 50 years of faithful caring, we also look forward to the years ahead. We are encouraged to seek opportunities to foster our connection with our Mennonite faith and the many churches that support Donwood. We are inspired to respond to the growing need for affordable seniors housing. We are motivated to continue to provide compassionate, meaningful living for seniors. It is together as a community of staff, volunteers, residents, tenants, family caregivers, churches, and Board Directors that Donwood will live out its mission of *Caring for Seniors with Dignity, Respect, and Christian Values*.

Nina Labun, RN, MN

*Chief Executive Officer*







# Acknowledgements



As Donwood's 50<sup>th</sup> year approached, the Donwood Manor Foundation Board turned their attention to planning activities to mark this milestone in the organization's history. Consensus soon followed to include a project that would capture the past 50 years and document the past for present and future generations.

This anniversary book is the result of many hours of research, interviews, writing, editing, and design work. On behalf of the Foundation Board, I would like to express our gratitude to Sarah Klassen who accepted the invitation to research and write the 50-year history. We are also grateful for Abe Dueck's expertise as editor and final reviewer of the completed text. Finally, we want to thank Nina Labun for her work in collecting archival material, editing and gathering contributors to the manuscript, and Shauna Wear for conducting some of the interviews featured in the book.

On behalf of the Donwood Manor Foundation, I hope that readers will be inspired by the impact Donwood has made in its first 50 years and be encouraged to support Donwood in its mission of *Caring for Seniors with Dignity, Respect, and Christian Values*.

Brian Loewen

*Donwood Manor Foundation Board Chair*



Donwood Manor and Donwood EPH

# I. *In The Beginning*

Institutions, like individuals, have life stories that are worth recording and preserving for present and future generations. A good story includes successes achieved, obstacles overcome, and mistakes made. A true story is instructive and bears retelling. The Donwood story traces the life of an institution dedicated to serving the elderly. It begins fifty years ago and describes Donwood's growth beyond its original site, initial capacity, and early health care capability. In 2020, after half a century, the story is still unfolding.



On July 17, 1970, Donwood Manor opened its doors and admitted its first residents. By March 1971 all 81 beds in this newly-constructed personal care home were occupied and forty names remained on the waiting list.

The word “Donwood”—taken from Donwood Drive—is applied to a number of establishments built by Mennonite Brethren churches in Winnipeg during the 1970s and 1980s to provide for the elderly. The first was Donwood Manor, a personal care home (PCH). The second, the Elderly Persons Housing facility (EPH), was attached to the PCH. The EPH was intended for seniors who were still able to live independently. Donwood South was next, its apartments also intended for independent living. Donwood West, a 55-plus life lease condo was the last to be built. Valhalla Cove, an existing life lease condominium, was later placed under Donwood management.



Opening Ceremony



## TRADITION AND BACKGROUND

It is no coincidence that all of the buildings except Donwood West are located in North Kildonan, where the project began. Mennonite immigrants had settled in this part of north east Winnipeg in the 1920s after fleeing the Russian revolution and its aftermath. Along the first muddy streets of North Kildonan they built their houses, churches, factories and businesses. They were already settled and flourishing when, after WWII, another wave of Mennonite immigrants, many of them refugees fleeing the red sea of communism under Stalin, joined them.

The majority of immigrants in both groups had lived in small villages in Mennonite colonies and brought with them a tradition of community that was oriented around family and church. The biblical injunctions to “honour father and mother,” and “care for orphans and widows in their distress,” were taught and practiced. There was no government assistance when they established their own schools and built homes for the deaf and mute, for orphans, for the intellectually challenged and the physically handicapped. No institutions were built for the elderly: aging parents were cared for at home and remained part of the life of the family, church and community where their physical, spiritual and social needs were met.

When these Russian Mennonites came to Canada, families and churches continued to take responsibility for the aged, even though many no longer lived in villages and were no longer primarily rural, but, like the North Kildonan settlers, were rapidly becoming urbanized. The concentration of Mennonites in the streets of North Kildonan made it possible to retain a community feeling for several decades. Elderly persons were included in church life and found social opportunities in the like-minded neighbourhood.

The community thrived and, as time passed, these settlers, as people everywhere, lived longer, had better health care, and more disposable income. They valued their independence and did not necessarily want to live with their children when they retired. And perhaps their children could no longer accommodate such arrangements.

## VISION AND PLANNING

How would a changing community honour the desire of the elderly to live independently and make it possible for them to do so with dignity? As early as 1946, Mennonite Church Canada (General Conference) had launched Bethania, a home for the aged and infirm, just north of the city. Now individual members of the Mennonite Brethren (MB) Church began to envision something similar for their denomination. Henry Redekopp, a local businessman, believed it was time to undertake such a project and hoped the MB conference would agree to take it on. Jake Sudermann, administrator of Lions Manor, a Winnipeg home for seniors, and Helmut Peters, an architect who had designed several nursing homes, talked about the need for seniors’ housing over coffee. Like Redekopp, they believed the issue was important.

Such individual conversations eventually included others and led to formation of a committee to study the possibility of moving from vision to action. The committee included Neil Fast, Waldemar Redekopp, J.J. Riediger, John Suderman, Dr. Bernard Froese, J.A. Kroeker and others. In 1966 the committee approached the Manitoba Mennonite Brethren Conference with a proposal and, although the conference declined to take ownership of the project, permission was given for the committee to solicit support from the Winnipeg MB churches.

April 20th, 1971

Mr. W. A. Radekopp,  
Newman & McLean,  
436 Main St.,  
Winnipeg, Man.

Dear Sirs:

In reply to your phone call of yesterdays' date  
below are the details you asked for;

1. The Executives of the Board are

Mr. C. B. Fast	- Chairman
Mr. John Suderman	- Secretary Treas.
Mr. Walter Voth	- 1st Vice President
Dr. B. J. Froese	- 2nd Vice President
H. Klassen	- Administrator.

2. The Board was elected and became effective on January 1st, 1971.  
The first meeting was held on February 2, 1971

3. The Financial Statement was accepted on March 4, 1971.

Sincerely,  
DONWOOD MANOR

H. Klassen  
Administrator.

HK:ymc

THE EXAMINER Sept. 2nd. 1970

## Donwood Manor Official Opening

The official opening and dedication ceremonies of Donwood Manor will be held Saturday, September 19th., at 2:00 p.m. at 171 Donwood Drive. Premier Edward Schreyer and other dignitaries will be present.

Donwood Manor, a spacious eighty-one bed Personal Care Home, is sponsored by the Mennonite Brethren Geriatric Association of Metro Winnipeg Incorporated. Constant care is provided by a qualified, profession nursing staff. Socially, the Home offers group activities, crafts, a day centre and religious services of the individual's choice. The residents of Donwood Manor are representative of all denominations and all nationalities.

"To make everyday worth living" is our philosophy at work behind the scene which we try to achieve with practical applications of charity.

In September, a Day Centre will be opened at the Home. We invite all senior citizens of the community of North

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## DONWOOD MANOR

from Page 1

Kildonan to join in the activities at the Home. The senior citizens may bring their hobbies and projects and work at them here together with our residents, thereby developing new social bonds with the community.

Applications for admission to the Home may be made by contacting the office at 338-4663.

News story from The Examiner,  
September 2, 1970



Donwood Manor Personal Care Home 1972

The brochure prepared by this “founding committee” called the proposed residence “The Village North Senior Citizens Home.” It stated that “Because of the nature of the facility it dispels the loneliness that so often afflicts older people. It provides, instead, the opportunity for contacts, new relationships and a sense of security.” Clearly the planners had in mind the social rather than the physical needs of seniors who were still reasonably healthy and active. The plan focused more on housing than nursing care.

Another important issue for the founders was the location. It should be at the heart of the community where the residents would continue to live. The committee was not, however, restricting the intake area; they anticipated that future residents would come from all parts of the city, not just the north east.

A future stage of the project was to be a Day Centre where seniors could find opportunity for meaningful and productive activity in their free time. However, this part of the plan never became a reality.

A general meeting held on May 15, 1967 attracted 58 people who expressed favour for church sponsorship of the proposed residence. With the church’s blessing and participation, it would be possible to provide housing for the aging in the Mennonite tradition and spirit with which they were familiar and which felt right to the community.

The desire within the Mennonite community to provide for parents and the elderly reflected a similar concern within the general population. The government had taken note and was responding to these concerns with an offer of financial incentive to groups considering construction of personal care homes. Several such homes had already been built. The owners were required to pay for the land and 10% equity; the balance was covered by a mortgage from Canadian Mortgage and Housing Council (CMHC).

The founding committee, knowing that they could not hope to realize their plan for housing without government assistance, presented their proposal for a facility that would be 50% hostel and 50% nursing home to



the government. This proposal was rejected; the government funding was reserved for personal care homes. The committee was obliged to modify the plan and agree to a care home instead. The new plan required that the churches finance the cost of the land and 10% of the equity. The rest would come from the provincial government.

Response from the churches was mixed. Those not located in the immediate area were not convinced their members would benefit from the proposed housing. Others hesitated because they were not prepared or not able to take on this financial responsibility. By the fall of 1967, five out of eight MB churches in Winnipeg agreed in principle to the proposal. One congregation even borrowed money to pay their share of the start-up cost. Eventually, eight churches supported the project: Brooklands, Central, Elmwood, Fort Gary, North Kildonan, Portage Avenue, River East, and Salem. These churches were given representation on the founding committee.

The name chosen for the nursing home was Donwood Manor. The administrative board was called Mennonite Brethren Geriatric Association of Metro Winnipeg Inc. (MBGAMW). In September of 1969, a sod turning ceremony launched the construction and by the summer of 1970 Donwood Manor was ready to be occupied.

## DONWOOD MANOR

Towards the end of 1969 a notice appeared in the *Mennonite Brethren Herald* inviting applications for the position of administrator at the new personal care home under construction in North Kildonan. Helmuth Klassen, a former school principal in Niverville and presently teaching

in Winnipeg, read the ad, submitted his application and, between Christmas and year's end, was interviewed and hired. His duties would begin on March 1, 1970.

Donwood Manor was still under construction and Klassen was still under contract with his school board until June. Undaunted, he continued teaching on weekdays and on the weekends began a new career as first CEO of Donwood Manor. He was 26 years old. For twenty years Klassen would steer Donwood through many changes, steady growth, and challenges.

From his temporary office in the A. H. Unruh building at the Mennonite Brethren Bible College, Klassen conducted interviews and assembled a fledgling staff. Esther Wiebe was hired as Matron of Nursing; the important task of planning and making meals for the residents fell to Pauline Smith; Gerhard Friesen became both Activities Director and Chaplain. John Olfert was the first custodian and Adeline Klassen the first RN to be hired. The initial staff would soon be augmented. Klassen also began processing the requests for admission already pouring in.

On July 17, 1970 Donwood Manor admitted its first four residents. Adeline Klassen, on night duty, remembers that after the first four residents had retired for the night she spent the rest of the shift putting new linens and blankets on the remaining beds. By March 1971 there would be no empty beds. At the official opening ceremony on September 19, 1970, the community watched as Helmuth Klassen accepted the keys to Donwood Manor from architect Helmut Peters.

The first Board of Directors held their inaugural meeting on February 2, 1971 under the chairmanship of Waldemar Redekopp. "I always had a strong board with good chairmen," Klassen says. Such encouraging support would always be welcome, not only at the beginning.