

## **EPISODE 3 - "MCKENZIE TOWNE"**

### **COLD OPEN**

**[ARSHY MANN]**

Anytime you have to place a family member into long-term care, it's going to be difficult and complicated. For Shauna Parks and her siblings, taking care of their mother Brenda was especially so.

**[SHAUNA PARKS]**

We have a complicated family history and stuff. But being in this situation with my mom and communicating with her more than I have communicated with her my entire adult life. And really, as a teenager as well and as a child, too. I... It's just been bizarre.

**[ARSHY]**

Shauna grew up in foster care and her relationship with her mother has been fraught. But as her mom got old and frail, she's tried her best to be there for her.

**[PARKS]**

I'm thinking about how would I want to be treated if I was in her shoes? I would want my kids to reach out. Even if I had no relationship with them, even if I did terrible things, I would still want to hear from my kids. It's really been a bit of a mindfuck for me, to be honest.

**[ARSHY]**

Earlier this year, Shauna's mother's condition worsened.

**[PARKS]**

She had declining health, so she was in assisted living for a period of time. So, a number of different concerns came up for her, including diabetes, arthritis, pulmonary hypertension, and just made it so that she was becoming more and more immobile.

**[ARSHY]**

Brenda had been in the hospital. And then, as they sat on the provincial waiting list for long-term care, she was moved to a temporary facility.

**[PARKS]**

She was placed temporarily at a facility called Bow View Manor. And she was there for a short period of time before my brother received a phone call from Revera saying that they had a bed available for her. And because she was on the "urgent move" list, that they needed to act fast.

**[ARSHY]**

Revera was the owner of the for-profit long-term care facility that had just opened up a spot. By now, it's March of this year. The COVID-19 pandemic was in full-swing. Long-term care facilities has been locked down in Alberta where they lived, and that meant no visitors. So, Shauna and her siblings were worried.

**[PARKS]**

But Revera insisted that she be moved into this home because she would lose her place. There would be all these consequences. Really just put pressure on my brother to--to make the move.

**[ARSHY]**

Revera insisted on moving her into McKenzie Towne right away. What Shauna Parks, her mother Brenda, and the rest of their family didn't know was that the virus was already in the McKenzie Towne Care

Centre. In fact, a staff member had started exhibiting symptoms days before Brenda moved into the facility on March 15th. Shauna's mother was soon infected. And the McKenzie Towne outbreak would become the deadliest in all of Alberta.

I'm Arshy Mann, and from CANADALAND, this is *Commons*.

## **PART ONE**

### **[NEWS CLIP 1, MALE]**

A sombre Saturday afternoon at the McKenzie Towne Care Centre. The death toll due to COVID-19 at the facility rising to 18.

### **[NEWS CLIP 2, MALE]**

COVID-19 claims a third life at the McKenzie Towne long-term care facility in Southwest Calgary.

### **[NEWS CLIP 3, MALE]**

Alberta now has 48 deaths related to COVID-19, after two more deaths reported in the last 24 hours. One was in the Shepherd's Care Kensington facility in Edmonton, the other at McKenzie Towne Continuing Care facility in Calgary. That's 21 deaths inside that facility alone.

### **[ARSHY]**

Twenty-one people have now died from COVID-19 at the McKenzie Towne Care Centre. That's over 20 per cent of all the Albertans who have been killed by this virus, just at this one facility. But this isn't the first time that McKenzie Towne and its owners, Revera, have been in the news.

### **[BREANNE SINCLAIR]**

I think that if you spend any amount of time there, I think that the holes kind of quickly show of where they're lacking.

### **[ARSHY]**

That's Breanne Sinclair. Her grandmother, Wyonne Somers, was a resident at McKenzie Towne in 2013.

### **[SINCLAIR]**

She made an impact on everybody that she--she met. She was just... She was very caring, very loving. She had a positive outlook on all things, and she had this really kind of goofy side to her, a really, really silly side to her. She liked to have fun. She was she was a farm girl, grew up playing baseball. And then, you know, a lot of us grandkids ended up playing baseball as well. And my nana and my poppa were always there, supporting us. They were our--our biggest fans. So we have nothing but fond memories of my nana. She was... She was an angel. She really was.

### **[ARSHY]**

As she got older, Wyonne started to exhibit signs of early dementia, and by 2013, her family needed to find a place that could care for her. She was put on a provincial waiting list for long-term care and was taken to an interim facility in the meantime. Breanne remembers that day well.

### **[SINCLAIR]**

I don't think I'll ever forget that day, actually. She was... She was terrified of that move. She didn't know where she was. To her, we just dropped her off and left her there. She just didn't know what was going on, and there was no way of us explaining to her, that made sense to her, what was happening. It's heartbreaking. I think every family could relate to the feeling of--of guilt, of not being able to bring them into our own homes and care for them.

**[ARSHY]**

A permanent spot opened up in the McKenzie Towne Care Centre in 2013, and Wyonne moved in. Breanne remembers liking the look of the place.

**[SINCLAIR]**

It's nice. I mean, if you... If you want to look at it, and if you were to just, kind of, not know what has gone on behind the doors and--and look at it, it looks nice.

**[ARSHY]**

But quite quickly, Breanne became concerned by what she was seeing.

**[SINCLAIR]**

I remember visiting my nana one time and being in kind of the "main hall," I guess, and they had a--a medicine closet, basically, just kind of off that hall. The door was left open, completely open. It wasn't even that the door was closed and not locked. The door was left completely open with medications floor-to-ceiling on all the walls. And this patient had just wandered in there.

I didn't know what their state of mind was. I didn't want to startle them. So I did find a nurse, or a worker there, and told her. And, you know, she just... She led the person out, obviously, knowing their name and who they were and their temperament. But I just remember that being kind of like a "What the fuck" kind of moment.

**[ARSHY]**

Breanne remembers there just not being enough staff around.

**[SINCLAIR]**

Oftentimes when I went to visit my nana, even to just find somebody at the front desk to give me the code to get into the door was hard to do. There wasn't somebody. I'd be wandering around on the main floor, looking for anybody. And I couldn't find somebody.

**[ARSHY]**

Breanne was getting married that summer, and her mother came up from Washington State to help. It was around that time that things got much worse for her grandmother at McKenzie Towne.

**[SINCLAIR]**

My mom had come to Calgary to kind of help with my wedding and to visit with her mom. During that time, my mom had gone to see my nana and walked into her room. She was sleeping. And my nana's face was black and blue and purple. And you can imagine the horror of--of seeing someone like that, let alone your own mother, your elderly mother. And my mom found a nurse and asked what the fuck happened, and they had told her that my nana fell. Just... Just, simply, she fell. And my mom said, "When did this happen?" We didn't... We didn't know anything about this fall. The nurse had said that they had called the doctor and the doctor had determined over the phone, without actually seeing my nana, that it was nothing to worry about.

**[ARSHY]**

They took her to the hospital. And there, they discovered that she had a concussion.

**[SINCLAIR]**

I don't even think that the word "stressful" can, uh--can quite describe what--what we were feeling. You know, it's... [sighs] It was... It was a lot. A big reason why we had moved her to McKenzie Towne was they had had kind of been known for their team of wound specialists. And because of the diabetes, that my nana had, she did have some wounds, kind of, on her legs that--that did require regular attention, regular cleaning and, and dressing changes.

**[ARSHY]**

But the proper cleaning wasn't done and her wounds became infected. Soon, she was entirely unresponsive.

**[SINCLAIR]**

She was taken to our South Calgary Health Campus, which is... I can't... I can't thank all of those doctors and nurses enough for the care that they provided her for those last two weeks of her life. They were amazing. I visited her every day. My mom was here, staying with her.

Somehow, miraculously, she did wake up and had... [sobbing] I'm sorry. We got to spend some very cherished last moments with her. Really, really beautiful moments. She would kind of come to, and be her kind of witty, sweet, sassy self.

I think for all of us, it was. Just a--a moment that whatever you believe in. We were given a moment, a period of time to see her the way that we all remembered her. Small glimpses. We will cherish that for the rest of our lives. She passed away in her sleep on the morning of October 31st.

**[ARSHY]**

Breanne believes that if her grandmother had received the proper care, she wouldn't have died.

**[SINCLAIR]**

I remember the--the doctors, the nurses who, once she was admitted to the South Calgary Health Campus, looking at the--the wounds. She had one on the back of her calf and one on her heel. Looking at them and just--just shaking their heads and confirming to us that those wounds were not looked after. They were not given the attention that they required to ensure that this didn't happen. She slipped through the cracks. It, 100 percent, was neglect.

**[ARSHY]**

Wyonne Somers wasn't the only person to die from blood poisoning at McKenzie Towne in 2013. Violet MacDonald, a 73-year-old woman, died in a similar manner the same month as Somers: Blood poisoning, caused by untreated wounds.

The deaths prompted a review by Alberta Health Services into McKenzie Towne, which found a number of practices not up-to-standard. Pharmaceuticals left out in the open, residents' medical files weren't kept up-to-date, and improper wound care. Revera promised to correct these failings. But there were no sanctions for the company and life went on.

## **PART TWO**

**[ARSHY]**

For Shauna Parks, who you heard from at the top of this episode, the history of McKenzie Towne didn't make much of a difference for whether or not her mother would be placed there. She didn't really have much of a choice. It was either McKenzie Towne, or risk being kicked off of the provincial waitlist entirely.

Shauna's mother Brenda was worried about the move right from the beginning.

**[PARKS]**

She definitely asked us like, "Why? Why was I moved at such a bad time? Like, what happened?"

**[ARSHY]**

Right away, it looked like staffing was an issue.

**[PARKS]**

When she first moved in, they were clearly short-staffed. And that was evident with our mom complaining a number of times to us about not getting her prescribed medication on time. She relies on a pain medication that's administered at night to help her sleep, and it's her only reprieve from her chronic pain. And one night she didn't get it until two-thirty in the morning and she's supposed to have it at nine o'clock at night.

**[ARSHY]**

And then they heard that someone had died of COVID-19.

**[PARKS]**

Once they announced the first death at McKenzie Towne, that's when things started to get really out of control because there were--There were staff that were roaming around coughing and working in the facility. Just, very little precautions that were being taken, if any at all.

**[ARSHY]**

But Revera didn't inform their residents' families about the death right away. Shauna and her siblings heard about it from the press.

**[PARKS]**

To find out that Mackenzie Town had its first death in the home through the media was disturbing.

**[ARSHY]**

Within a few days of arriving at McKenzie Towne, Shauna's mother was exhibiting symptoms of COVID-19.

**[PARKS]**

When we first heard about the first deaths at McKenzie Towne, we were really clear that our mom needed to be tested because we were saying she has symptoms of COVID, and they were saying she didn't.

**[ARSHY]**

Eventually, they were able to get a test done.

**[PARKS]**

When my mom was tested, they still had nurses going into her room without protective gear on. So while they knew she was being tested, there were still people, still health care professionals putting themselves at risk and putting other residents at risk, going in and out of her room.

**[ARSHY]**

Shauna's mother Brenda tested positive. But even then, adequate protections weren't put in place.

**[PARKS]**

They didn't have enough staff to monitor dementia patients. So my mom, a number of times in her COVID recovery, in the midst of being contagious, had a number of other residents walk into her room, thinking they were in the right room. They were maybe disoriented and then were exposed to the virus. So, it was very clear early-on that the resources were not in place, that the staffing was not in place, to manage this outbreak.

**[ARSHY]**

The staffing shortage meant Brenda couldn't get proper care even while she was infected.

**[PARKS]**

There were times when my mom, when her recovery was trying to get her congestion cleared and she was in a laying position, which is terrible for COVID, and couldn't get someone to--to move her bed up, or to get her into her wheelchair, for hours. So, she struggled with breathing for hours, and then was placed on oxygen because they couldn't get to her in time. That's not bad staff. It's, "We don't have enough staff." But I wonder how many people died as a result of not having enough hands on deck to--to take care of their--their needs?

**[ARSHY]**

Dr. Deena Hinshaw, Alberta's chief medical officer, acknowledges that protocols weren't followed at McKenzie Towne.

**[DEENA HINSHAW]**

There are protocols with respect to testing and making sure that we quickly identify if that is a case of COVID. In the case of McKenzie Towne, unfortunately, uh, that outbreak protocol seems to have not been implemented immediately, so there does seem to have been a significant amount of exposure.

**[ARSHY]**

Revera's response to the pandemic has enraged many of the resident's families.

**[PARKS]**

Revera sent out a letter to all of the families who had loved ones living there at the care center and included a hundred-dollar Save-On-Foods gift card. Isn't that ridiculous? And other family members, other families, they were just... They were disgusted by this--this step that Revera had taken. And really, could those resources have been allocated differently? Oh, God, for sure.

**[ARSHY]**

We asked Revera for comment about what happened to both Breanne Sinclair's grandmother and Shauna Park's mother but we didn't get a response.

A month and half after she came to McKenzie Towne, Shauna's mother has recovered, and is now COVID-free.

**[PARKS]**

Thankfully, she's gone through those symptoms and she's at the other end of it. She's had better nights of sleep. She's not dealing with a cough or any of those symptoms,

But she's in isolation, right? And--and so she doesn't get to go out of her room. And the only...The only connection to the outside world is--is through her cell phone and FaceTime.

## **OUTRO**

**[ARSHY]**

When Breanne Sinclair heard that more people were dying at McKenzie Towne Care Centre from COVID-19 than anywhere else in Alberta, she wasn't shocked.

**[SINCLAIR]**

I didn't feel surprised. I didn't feel surprised at all. I mean, when Dr. Hinshaw came out and said that McKenzie Towne did not follow the protocols in place to prevent or stop an outbreak, that was infuriating. That made me so mad. It just seems like they have no regard for these people's lives.

I want to be very clear, here. I don't blame the staff. They're put in a really tough position.

**[ARSHY]**

Shauna doesn't blame the staff either. She sees that they're just trying to do their best in a terrible situation.

But she believes there should be consequences for what happened to her mother and so many other residents at McKenzie Towne: Consequences for the company that runs the facility and the government that oversees it.

**[SINCLAIR]**

Knowing that Revera was made aware of the first presumptive case on the 12th of March and our mom was moved in on the six-- 15th or 16th... That is negligent. That absolutely never should have happened. And Revera will be held accountable and we absolutely will be pursuing legal measures in order to address that.

It was like we were the testing grounds for how they were going to respond to other outbreaks in other facilities. And I think that is morally, ethically... It's disturbing, it's wrong. And whistleblowers were trying to do that in the beginning, and saying, like, "This is unacceptable. People need to get in. The--the testing needs to happen. Staffing needs to be addressed. And to see it happening too late now, like it's just... It's a tragedy and it could have been avoided.

**[ARSHY]**

If an institution like McKenzie Towne didn't have the resources or the best practices to help someone like Wyonne Somers in 2013, are we surprised they can't deal with an unprecedented pandemic?

This virus may be novel. But the roots of this tragedy go much deeper.

## **END CREDITS**

**[ARSHY]**

That's your episode of *Commons* for the week. This episode relied on reporting done by Jill Croteau at Global News Calgary, CBC News and many others.

If you want to get in touch with us, you can tweet at us at @COMMONSpod. You can also email me, Arshy@canadalandsow.com. This episode was produced by myself and Jordan Cornish, our managing editor is Andrea Schmidt, and our music is by Nathan Burley.

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