



Variety Village: An Extended History

Back in 1948 in Toronto, Canada's only Variety Club at that time undertook, among its many works, the building, equipping and maintenance of a vocational guidance and training school and residence for youth. It was a project designed to provide an open door to a new life and more abundant opportunities for boys with physical disabilities between 16 and 18 years of age. Naturally, along with Variety, there were other valued participants involved in launching and making this dream a reality. The Ontario Society for Crippled Children and the Provincial and Federal governments both gave with expertise, land and grants.

As a result, in December of 1948 the cornerstone was laid on land donated by the province of Ontario by Premier George Drew. In the fall of 1949, Variety Village opened its doors, situated in Scarborough, near the junction of Kinston Road and Danforth Avenue, on a site of high land on the rim of a valley overlooking Lake Ontario.

With the co-operation of field nurses from the Ontario Society for Crippled Children, the students were chosen from applications received from all over the province. Each student was selected on the basis of being considered most capable of benefitting from the courses. To look after the initial 40 students the school required a staff of fifteen people including a school principal, two trade instructors, a commercial teacher, an academic teacher, a matron, two house mothers, a recreation director, a caretaker, a secretary, a bookkeeper, a cook and an assistant cook and a kitchen maid.

The training school began with three main areas of endeavour: shop, watch-making, and the commercial departments.

The shop courses included mechanical drafting, heating and air conditioning designing, blue-printing, electric and oxy-acetylene welding, sheet metal work, small electric appliance repair, and other related work. The watch-making course was as its name implies. The commercial course offered specialization in office training, typing, bookkeeping, handling of business machines and other related subjects.

Hobbies too played a major role in the student's life at the Village, with photography, leather crafting, etching, plastic crafting and stamp collecting high on the list of leisure-time favourites. Recreation needs were filled with arts, physical education, swimming, and target practise at the local police rifle range.

Right from the start, frequent visits from show business and sports celebrities, noted international and Canadian men and women, and members of royalty were constant assurance to the students of the importance of their journey toward their goal of graduation.

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Over the years, hundreds of young people graduated from Variety Village and proudly set forth to become valued and leading citizens in their communities. Their pride and satisfaction was matched only by the dedicated staff and volunteers at Variety Village, and the Variety Club Executive, Crew and members who had watched the school grow.

But as time passed, the need for such a vocational school was to diminish as provincial health care came into being and inclusion and integration became more important. So the format of Variety Village needed to change and new projects became the focus of the club's activities in the late 1970s.

In 1978 the Variety Club of Ontario accepted the unique challenge of creating a centre where "every youngster would have the opportunity to be physically fit and the chance to participate in competitive sports." In 1981, Variety Village, a world class indoor sports facility, opened its doors. Since then, athletes, instructors and coaches have focused on developing skills, strategies and attitudes that reflect a competitive spirit.

Right from the start, there was adapted physical education, swim classes, track and field, archery, fencing, basketball, and a three-tiered Children in Motion activity program. Over the years, other sports such as rhythmic gymnastics, sledge hockey, synchronized swimming, kayaking, rock wall climbing and tae kwon do were added to the extensive list of programs offered at the Village.

Variety Village also became a strong supporter of reverse integration. It is one of the few facilities where fathers, mothers, siblings and friends who are able-bodied can borrow a wheelchair and get involved in a game of wheelchair basketball. There are also the many Outreach activities that promote access, diversity in ability and inclusive environments. An entire school will get a chance to try specialized equipment, feel a braille book, use a sports wheelchair and learn a little about communicating with a person who is deaf.