

Testimony at the Mental Health Forum at the LOB by Richard Weingarten, Jan. 29, '13

Almost 40 years ago, at age 28, I was stricken with a deep and immobilizing depression. I entered psychotherapy and was given the grave prognosis of "acutely reactive psychosis." However, my first therapist gave me the hope that one day I'd be able to live a normal life if I would reconstruct my negative self image. I have endeavored to do this. Recovery actually took much more hard work.

It took me 12 years to accept my illness and begin my recovery. When I left the therapist in Boston and moved to southern California to complete my education, I was in and out of mental hospitals several times during terrible psychotic episodes. My doctors urged me to live a quiet life, take my medication faithfully like a person with diabetes and not attempt too much i.e. go back to work. If I improved perhaps I could work as a dishwasher in a restaurant, one doctor advised. This advice didn't mesh with my goals. I wanted to lead an active life again.

In summer of 1986, after a long hospitalization and med change, I joined a self help group at a public mental health agency in Cleveland, Ohio. The self help group was working on a discharge handbook for patients coming out of Cleveland State Hospital. The staff at the agency showed me incredible respect and empowered me with generous support. Seeing the finished handbook, my first therapist suggested a new and valued social role for me, that of an "information giver" for other people stricken with mental illness and the general public. I began writing and speaking out on behalf of people with mental illness and their families. With new purpose and direction, and using my writing and speaking skills, my strengths, I began my journey of recovery. For the

next four years, still symptomatic with bouts of depression, paranoia and delusions, I tried working in the mental health field, on a suburban newspaper and college teaching before choosing to make my career in mental health. I found there was something genuine about working with people with mental disabilities. If they liked you, they came back. If they didn't, they voted with their feet and you never saw them again.

After a job search that lasted two years, I came to New Haven, CT in summer 1994 to work as Director of Consumer Affairs at the CT Mental Health Center. Working everyday in a meaningful role was the best medicine for me, like it is for many people with and without a mental disability. Work enables me, and others, to focus our minds and energies and keep our demons at bay. It provides purpose and meaning to one's life. Knowing this, I created many services and educational programs in New Haven and Bridgeport that employed people in recovery to help others who were not so far along in their recoveries.

I have published more than 40 articles about my illness, recovery and work in the mental health field. I was given a faculty appointment in the Department of Psychiatry at the Yale University School of Medicine. Being able to speak Portuguese from my Peace Corps service in Brazil, I began consulting in Brazil in the late 1990s and brought out two books, in Portuguese, that introduced the concept of recovery to that country. Later, as part-time faculty at Housatonic Community College in Bridgeport, I helped people with mental disabilities learn the skills and competencies that made them employable in the mental health field. Several of my students went on to earn two year and four year degrees.

In June 2009 I retired from State Service. Since then I have consulted throughout the U.S. and Canada and also in the Netherlands and Israel. I introduced a peer-led educational program -- the WRAP -- that is now being taught in the Netherlands and Brazil.

Despite these successes, my illness has not gone away. But I have adopted a healthy life style that maximizes the healthy aspects of myself. This includes a healthy diet, regular sleep and rest, almost daily exercise, meaningful work, a strong support network. And yes, medication, and psychotherapy for added support. I also steer clear of high sensory environments and prefer to meet with one or two people at a time rather than in large groups.

In 2003 I was given the "Stigma Buster of the Year" award by DMHAS, NAMI-CT and the CT Psychiatric Society. I continue to work on reducing the harsh societal stigma towards people with mental illness and their families. We know stigma causes people not to seek treatment and because of discrimination stigma eliminates many life opportunities for people with mental disabilities.

The good news is that most people with mental conditions are able to recover and reclaim new lives for themselves. The bad news is that tragedies like the Newtown massacre give new life to the harsh and inaccurate stigma that people with mental illness are violent and dangerous, and that people don't recover from mental illness...

My hope is that with better and more comprehensive mental health services, and sensible gun legislation, senseless tragedies won't reoccur. Thank you.

I believe that state-funded services, in a recovery-based system of care, hold much promise for people with psychiatric disabilities and their families. I have seen the wonderful social and vocational rehabilitation work that the clubhouses provide for their members. Relearning social skills after years of withdrawal, as is so often the case after the illness strikes, is a necessity as is finding a community of one's peers. Today supported housing and supported work programs are empirically tested and more effective than ever. But much more affordable housing needs to be created for this population. Clinical services at the public mental health agencies provide essential education and support to people stricken with these devastating, bewildering and life-changing illnesses. The peer-run services that I have been involved with provide education, peer support, socialization and recreation for peer providers and peer-clients alike.

Clubhouses and peer-run services offer opportunities of citizenship through advocacy efforts such as the Keep the Promise Coalition and today's Mental Health Forum. Educational programs such as NAMI's In Our Own Voice video program and our Democratic elections provide still more opportunities for citizenship.

The State of Connecticut is to be praised and greatly thanked for offering one of the best public, mental health systems in the country. But the needs are great, the job is unfinished and much more work needs to be done.

Thank you for your attention.