

Bill Hofmeyer's Speech

Celebrate Mental Health Awards

May 7, 2007

Welcome to everyone here, especially our special guests who have been mentioned before.

This is perhaps the most important public event in the CMHA year and it is important as we honour those who have made a significant contribution to improving mental health in the community and alert the community how important mental health is to every aspect of our lives.

We know this intuitively, but often forget to nurture our mental health in the hustle and bustle of our everyday lives. We work long hours, we do not have time to catch up with friends and we often lead stressful lives. We forget to find the work/life balance that is the theme of this year's Mental Health Week.

CMHA has a significant role to play in promoting this balance. Our name is the Canadian Mental Health Association, not the Canadian Mental Illness Association, and our role is not only to improve the mental health for those with a mental illness but of the whole community. The first thing to do is to encourage each and every one of us to recognize how mental health is the key that unlocks the door to a quality life.

When people speak of health lately a key phrase is that of the social determinants of health, some of which include housing, education, employment, income, social connectedness. Unless we have been on a different planet we all know about shortage of safe and affordable housing lately as it has got huge coverage in the media and millions of dollars are being allocated to address this issue. I am pleased to say that CMHA is in the process of developing a safe and affordable housing complex on 124 St and so make a small contribution to the housing solution.

However, what is not getting so much coverage is the importance of strong relationships in promoting mental health. It is something most of us take for granted, most of us know people here that we can just go up to and be welcomed yet many of us here cannot. However, when we stop to think we realize how important relationships are with our family, our friends, our work, social and sports clubs, church and a host more. It is in these places that we can have a sense of belonging, express our personalities, fulfill our needs as human beings and feel included and relevant to someone else's life.

One of CMHA's values is that of Community Integration and in my belief the ultimate determinant of whether we are successful as an agency. Because the very things that we take for granted, the inclusiveness through relationships, is denied many in the community who suffer with mental illness. They inherently suffer the effects of mental illness, but more than that they suffer the stigma imposed by the community. Theirs often is a life of exclusion for no other reason than that they have a mental illness. They have the same wants, needs, desires as you and I, but cannot fulfill them because of our attitude not because they lack the ability.

The community excludes people with a mental illness in many ways the most visible through behaviour. However, one very powerful and enduring way to exclude people with a mental illness is through the language we use. In all my years of working in the mental health field I have never met a schizophrenic in my life, not once. In fact there is no such creature, yet we continue to define people with schizophrenia in this way. It is a label that seeks to keep people in their place and makes us feel better because we are not like them. So language is a powerful tool we use to exclude people yet so easy to remedy by changing the way we think of people and becoming more inclusive as to how we define them. Please begin by thinking inclusively and so influence others.

This is why these awards are even more special than they would first appear as the winners are advocates of promoting inclusion for all. This inclusion contributes to the life balance I first mentioned and goes a long way to promoting mental health. It is hugely gratifying to know that this sort of work goes on day in and day out in the community and bodes well for the future. The fact that we are all here suggests that mental health is important to us and that is the start in an amazing journey. Please continue this journey of making mental health matter by practicing inclusion not just today but into the future.

Thank you.