

EDITORIAL

Allies

By Irit Shimrat

I first got locked up, and became an editor and activist, in Toronto. All the time I worked on *Phoenix Rising** magazine and coordinated the Ontario Psychiatric Survivors' Alliance, I was guided by one key principle: The only voices that mattered were those of the diagnosed.

I saw myself as one of a small number of angry lunatics screaming into the void about the problem with psychiatry. I couldn't stop thinking about the horrible shit that had happened to me, and to so many of my friends, when we got mental-healed. Many people I know have stayed in the system, willingly or unwillingly, putting up with a much-diminished life. Some have killed themselves to escape the shame of permanent patienthood, or the agonizing drug effects, or the nightmare of withdrawal.

There were always some of us whose anger led us to organize, to publish, to find ways to expose injustice and to help each other. Although it was hard to get along and agree on goals, we did, and do, good work. But the so-called mental health system just keeps growing, feeding on the despair and isolation engendered by our profit-motive society. As the rich keep getting richer, corporations – which now enjoy more human rights than humans do – increasingly control governments that squash the poor and the different. Meanwhile, “mental health care,” once the province of psychiatric institutions and wards, has branched out into every walk of life. More and more, its

treatments are being administered not only in “community mental health” centres but in schools, at work, and in people's homes.

“Extended Leave” (outpatient committal) provisions in BC's Mental Health Act allow “caregivers” to invade your home at their convenience, ensure that you swallow your pills, inject you by force if you refuse and – if you're sufficiently noncompliant – lock you back up in the hospital.

It has been odd taking government money to put out this publication, in which I and others have often criticized government-controlled “mental health” laws and policies. As the voice of the West Coast Mental Health Network, *The Networker* has of course often aired the views of people who see themselves as “consumers of mental health care services.” But we've also published psychiatric survivors like me, who see ourselves as having been damaged by psychiatry's treatments and its use of force.** We see troubling behaviour as being caused by life circumstances, rather than by faulty brain chemistry. Though some of us are still addicted to psychiatric drugs, we reject the idea of psychiatry as a science, seeing it rather as a means of social control.

What I have learned after decades of failed efforts to change the status quo is that we can't do it on our own. We need our allies, and we should appreciate them. From my perspective, the most important strides we have made in BC since the 1970s (the early days of the MPA)*** were inspired, arranged and paid for by allies. Friends of mine who have never been psychiatrized found out about Robert Whitaker**** after the publication of his second book, *Anatomy of an Epidemic*. They brought Whitaker and other activists to town to speak. They gave us a space in which to meet and plan and help each other. We have also had great support from ARA, the advocacy organization that houses our office (whose funding is now threatened), as well as from journalists,

human rights groups, academics, lawyers, physicians willing to help people taper off psychiatric drugs, dissident professionals and, very notably, family members who are horrified by what psychiatry has done to their loved ones.

Our allies often have advantages that most of us don't. They have not been crushed by psychiatry the way we have. Many have more material resources than most of us do. They care deeply about our rights. They are often less prone to infighting than we are, and less devastated by setbacks. With their help, we can bring our issues to light more easily and be taken more seriously.

That is why, in this final issue of *The Networker*, I have let go of the idea of publishing our voices exclusively. Rob Wipond's article (page 8), and Beckwoman's artwork (page 16) struck me as too good, too relevant and too important to exclude, though neither Rob nor Beckwoman has ever been psychiatrized. Nor has Jane Whittington, for whose proofreading help I am grateful.

I wish *Networker* readers all the best, and hope that, despite our loss, we will move on to further endeavours, working together with our allies. My dream is that, together, we will eventually be able to provide, and take advantage of, many viable alternatives to psychiatric “treatment,” which is based on fake science but does real harm.

* See psychiatricurvivorarchives.com/phoenix.html

** For more on this topic, see absoluteprohibition.wordpress.com

*** See historyofmadness.ca/the-inmates-are-running-the-asylum

**** See madinamerica.com