

A mental health model that works

BY TAYLOR SISK

To be diagnosed with a severe and persistent mental illness is, quite often, to be labeled an “other.” It’s an isolating experience. For many, simply having a place to go, where a sense of belonging is nurtured, can make all the difference in the world.

This premise is the foundation of a model of mental health care called clubhouse, introduced 64 years ago with the opening of Fountain House in New York City. There are now more than 300 clubhouses around the world, eight in North Carolina, which follow standards set by the International Center for Clubhouse Development.

These clubhouses are founded on the belief that “recovery from serious mental illness must involve the whole person in a vital and culturally sensitive community,” with the individual as a partner in that recovery.

Essentially, clubhouses are community centers, offering hope and opportunity.

My first-hand experience with clubhouses is as a board member of Club Nova in Carrboro. Club Nova operates under a Community Bill of Rights comprising four guarantees: a place to come, meaningful work, meaningful relationships and a place to return.

Club members participate in the management and upkeep of Club Nova, and the club offers an employment program in collaboration with the local business community. Transitional employment helps bridge the gap between work within the clubhouse and independent employment. Members are often then placed in permanent jobs, with ongoing support.

“Before Club Nova,” said Jim Huegerich, director of Crisis and Human Services for the Chapel Hill Police Department, “like clockwork, those with chronic and persistent mental illness would cycle in and out of state mental hospitals every six months, initially surfacing with

law enforcement in a crisis. For those who are members of Club Nova, this cycle has essentially been broken.”

“Throughout my career as a police officer, I’ve met many people associated with Club Nova, and I’ve grown both professionally and personally through those contacts,” Carrboro Police Chief Carolyn Hutchison said. “I value the collaborative relationship that exists between the Carrboro Police Department and Club Nova.”

Why not more?

Clubhouses are “the most cost-effective treatment for the persistently mentally ill,” said state Sen. Ellie Kinnaird, a longtime supporter.

Threshold Clubhouse in Durham compiled some statistics in 2010 that help define the cost-effectiveness of the model. Based on its Medicaid reimbursement rate, six months of care at Threshold costs \$10,412, less than the price of eight days of psychiatric care at Central Regional Hospital. (That reimbursement rate has since been reduced.)

Studies have shown the rehospitalization rate for people with severe and persistent mental illness to be as high as 40 percent after six months and 75 percent after five years. For 2011, Threshold had a rehospitalization rate of 7 percent after one year, a number consistent with past years and with other clubhouses in the state.

Places of employment for Club Nova members have included Staples, the YMCA, Carolina Fitness, the UNC School of Social Work, Open Eye Cafe and the Mental Health Association.

“Club Nova members gain real work experience and renewed self-confidence,” state Rep. Verla Insko said, “and the business people gain insights into the strengths and abilities of people with mental illness, as well as some very good workers.”

Clubhouse members aren’t just good workers, they’re good teachers.

“Club Nova has been a place

of learning for me and for my students that is penetrating and constantly renewing,” said Sue Estroff, a professor in UNC’s School of Social Medicine. Club members have been guest lecturers in her classroom for years, and she sometimes moves that classroom to the clubhouse.

“The visit is indelible for the students,” she said.

Welcome

These are all compelling arguments for the funding of clubhouses. But the importance of that simple guarantee of a place to go shouldn’t be downplayed. In a fundamental regard, the clubhouse structure itself is salvation.

Susan Coppola is a clinical associate professor in UNC’s division of occupational science. We build ramps for wheelchairs and make other adaptations for conditions like vision or hearing loss, she points out.

But “invisible conditions, like mental illness, require more subtle environmental adaptations that are difficult to understand,” she said. “Because of the complexity, and, let’s face it, the stigma of mental illness, we are reluctant to invest in environmental situations that reasonably accommodate and support these conditions.

“Individuals with mental illness and their families have had to work outside the system to create these environments, and do so at a very low cost.”

Clubhouses, Coppola said, are such efforts in action.

Recent research into the phenomenon of resiliency finds that people recover from illness – both physical and psychological – better when they have social support.

“Clubhouse member” may just sound like pretty words, said Jacquie Gist, a member of the Carrboro Board of Aldermen. “But that’s what it’s about, and it really makes a difference. Not ‘patient’; not ‘client.’ ‘Clubhouse member.’ It’s a sense of belonging, and an indication of how members are valued.”

Some years ago, Jonah Pierce,

a nurse now working with HIV/AIDS patients, was receiving treatment after two suicide attempts, and was progressing well. But, he said, “I desperately needed to be needed in some way.”

The desire to belong is universal, Pierce said, but it’s especially true for those with a stigmatizing illness. “Immediately upon coming to Club Nova, I felt this incredible sense of welcome.”

“I’ve known some members for 30 years now,” Gist said, “and I’ve seen how they’ve been given the resources to get by, the support tools they need to live and thrive.”

And, she adds, “Most importantly, it’s done with dignity.”

The clubhouse experience can help people with mental health disabilities overcome not only their symptoms but the feelings of despair that can develop when their lives are turned upside down by mental illness.

“These are the things that can disable you,” said Larry Fricks, a national advocate for peer support in mental health treatment, “your symptoms, the stigma and the way your self-image changes when you experience mental illness.”

“I have no desire to go back to my former days before Club Nova,” said member Charlene Lee. “I have a strong desire to move forward,” and she has.

Insko said that among her priorities as a member of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Health and Human Services is protecting funding for clubhouses across the state.

As we continue to defund and dismantle mental health care services in North Carolina, please ask your representatives to advocate for this critical, cost-effective and proven model of care. You’ll be serving your community well.

“Club Nova is something our community can be straight-up proud about,” Gist said. “It’s something we’ve done right as a community. ... It saves lives.”

AG SUMMIT

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pollination.

Tapp said the key to the success of his business was finding a niche in the market, thinking creatively and focusing on marketing his product, which he feels is the weakest part of the agricultural industry.

“Thinking outside the box and staying local is the name of the game,” he said.

Matthew Roybal, manager of the new Piedmont Food and Agricultural Processing Center in Hillsborough, believes his center

can help local farmers market their product and make connections.

“We hope to bridge the gap between growers and retail producers,” he said.

Roybal said some companies, such as Amy’s, which makes organic vegetarian frozen meals, have approached him to inquire about getting local produce.

Through the center, Roybal said he hopes he can help increase demand for farmers’ products, thereby helping the local economy.

“We all win when agriculture thrives,” Price said.

PEACE & JUSTICE

FROM PAGE 1

in front of the post office and the entryway near Bank of America Plaza on Franklin Street, prohibits groups from using the space between 2 a.m. and 7 a.m. In addition, groups must apply for permits 48 hours in advance in order to use either space, though groups without permits may use the spaces for up to three hours if the spaces aren’t already reserved by other groups.

The regulation also stipulates that permits won’t be issued for more than seven consecutive days to the same group and that groups can’t reserve both sides of Peace and Justice Plaza at the same time.

Those who violate the regulations could be fined up to \$500.

Council member Jim Ward said he would have preferred to allow groups to stay overnight at the plaza.

“I think the more freedoms we can give people, the better off we are. I think we are who we are because of that kind of attitude,” he said.

However, others said they felt that camping overnight wasn’t appropriate, given that the town has to make bathrooms available in order for that to be acceptable.

Council member Laurin Easthom cast the lone vote against the regulations, saying she felt the council needed to

have a discussion on civil disobedience before implementing such an ordinance.

Several members of the public spoke in opposition of the regulations, saying they hinder First Amendment rights.

“We must err on the side of openness and access to the public commons,” said Will Raymond, adding that there are “vanishingly few public spaces left to assemble as citizens. If not Peace and Justice Plaza, where?”

“What concerns me is that the people who are down there peacefully and who are trying to work for a better change for our community and our state may end up, if the wrong ordinances are passed, with fewer rights than the bar patrons who organize outside bars,” said Carol Edmonds.

Others argued that enforcement of the regulations was needed in order to respect the interests of all of the town’s residents and visitors.

Brandy McDonald, who owns East End Oyster and Martini Bar, across Henderson Street from Peace and Justice Plaza, urged the board to enforce regulations.

“You’ve allowed numerous regulations to be broken without consequence,” she said. “I think it is ... unconstitutional to pick and choose who has to adhere to town code and who does not.”

FOR THE

all February

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GLASSHALFULL

1/2 off bottles from wine list every Monday in February.

NEAL’S DELI

Mardi Gras celebration this Saturday thru Tuesday. Muffuletta sandwiches, gumbo, king cake, beads & prizes!

OPEN EYE CAFE

Wine special: 2009 Domaine Galevan “Words of a Woman” cotes du Rhone red, \$6/glass or \$21/bottle.

SOUTHEASTERN CAMERA

Free custom 11x14 photo enlargement, now thru Feb 21 - just mention this ad!

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“Why I Love Carrboro” dinner for two giveaway. Visit restaurant for details!

CAROLINA CORE PILATES

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KPO PHOTO

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FIFTH SEASON

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BLU ICON

30% off cuts and highlights in February.

MODERN FOSSIL

Coats & sweaters 45% off. Check out new spring arrivals!

(All specials good in Feb. 2012 unless otherwise noted.)

This message brought to you by the Town of Carrboro, Chapel Hill/Carrboro Chamber of Commerce, RBC Bank, and The Carrboro Citizen.