
From: Ross
Sent: Sunday, 8 November 2015 2:50 PM
To: Advocacy and Support
Cc: liz mullinar
Subject: Heal For Life Foundation

8th November 2015

To Whom It May Concern,

I spent 42 years of my life working within the Mental Health System. The first 22 at an Institution called Mayday Hills Hospital in Beechworth Victoria. The last 20 was working in non-clinical Rehabilitation/Recovery Programs. Firstly as the Manager of a Rehabilitation Program connected with Albury Community Mental Health Service in Albury NSW. The program was vibrant, we created many group programs including educational, creative, work-programs and participants were also physically supported to attend training programs at the local TAFE specifically developed for our client group. Unfortunately due to policy decisions and the Psychiatrist who fully supported and believed in rehabilitation position was made redundant. I have always believed that people cannot recover in isolation and recognised the value of social connection and meaningful activity. After an 18 month stint as a Marketing Executive for a Disability Employment service for people with a Mental Health Diagnosis. I was employed by Gateway Health Psychosocial Rehabilitation Program. My role was to plan, develop, implement and evaluate a Young People specific Program. I ran this program for 11 years as a Community Support Worker..

The program was extremely successful and to gain and maintain funding I was encouraged by my Manager to present our Young People's Recovery Program at TheMHS (The Mental Health Services) Conferences. I encouraged the young people in the program to also share their stories of Recovery at these conferences. Also, at these Conferences I became inspired by international presenters advocating Recovery focused services. In 2008 I had the opportunity to attend a Recovery from Psychosis Conference in Perth WA. I was introduced to the Hearing Voices Approach. Research had identified that approx. 70% of Voice Hearers have experienced sexual abuse. And all have experienced Childhood Adversity.

On reflection I realised that our Young Peoples Program and the outcomes for the Young People really did demonstrate the people can and do recover and wanted to be part of this International Movement. The Young people had identified their needs and what had supported them in their Recovery as:

- Social Connection
- Understanding Mental Health & Wellbeing
- Meaningful Activity
- Life Skills.

The Aim of the Young Peoples Program was to create a paradigm shift in the way Mental Health Services are delivered.

They shared many stories of how the current mental health system was not helpful. With the support of Gateway Health we created the goal of creating a DVD of the Young people Sharing their Recovery Stories. We did this and 3 of the Young People from the Program presented at the 1st Hearing Voices Congress in Maastricht, Netherlands. We attended 4 Congresses in all, Nottingham in England, Savona in Italy and Cardiff in Wales. Also, over the years with support from Gateway we had the honour of bringing out international speakers to deliver training for service providers in our area. The connection between being given a mental health diagnosis and having experience of childhood trauma and abuse became obvious.

Throughout all of these opportunities the connection between having been given a Mental Health Diagnosis and horrible stories of childhood experiences. Empowering young people to tell their stories and make sense of their experience rather than being passive recipients of treatment by others has been the catalyst for these young people to gain mastery over their lives.

Attending the international congress's highlighted to me that my experience in Wodonga Australia was the same as in many other countries. Briefly the Hearing Voices Approach is about understanding and changing the relationship with their voices. The voices being disowned parts of self that hold the trauma memories.

All participants in the program had Mental Health Diagnoses and have now ditched their labels and have no further need for services.

Many of the Young people have trained and now work as Community Support Workers and facilitate our local Hearing Voices Group.

Now to Heal For Life Foundation:

In about 2011 one of the young people in our Program went to Heal for Life for a 2 week healing program for young women. She spoke very highly of her experience there and also I could see the growth in her on her return. Also, about this time Heal For Life conducted a 2 day Training in Albury. A participant from the Young People's Program who had been employed as a Community Support Worker at Gateway Health attended this training and raved about it. She believed that all staff from Gateway: Mental Health, D & A and Counselling Teams should be provided with this training.

Also at this time the Victorian Government with withdrawing funding from Psychiatric Disability programs.

I resigned my position. I still had a firm commitment understanding the relationship between Trauma and Mental Illness so was inspired to do training. One of the requirement to do training was to do my own Healing Week. This was an amazing experience. The Healing Team comprised a Facilitator and approx. 4-5 Peer Support Volunteers. It is a program run by Survivors for Survivors.

Over the last 2 years I have completed the 8 Modules in Therapeutic Skills in Trauma Healing and also done Facilitator Training. I cannot speak highly enough of the quality of the training.

Most importantly I have been part of the Healing Team on approx. 14 Healing Programs. That equates to witnessing approx.. 140 people experiencing the program. The transformation in a for Guests is clearly visible. Feedback from Guest is extremely positive with many describing the week as life changing.

I have heard 100's of stories of abuse and also institutional abuse particularly within the mental health system. The biggest abuse defining distressing experiences and an illness, a disease of the brain like Diabetes when this is a myth. Human distress is a normal response to abnormal life events.

In my experience a Healing Week (60 Hours) face to face equates to what it would take over 12 months of 1-1 support counselling and is far more cost effective and empowering for the person.

I have also attended 3 2 day training sessions of Trauma Informed Care Training for Health Service providers and seen the extremely positive feedback.

Heal for Life provides Healing Weeks for Adults, Young Women 16-25, Young Boy and Young Girl 12-16 and Kids Kamp for 8-12 year olds.

This is without any funding from Government.

Over 80% of guests attending Healing Weeks have be given Mental Health Diagnosis's

I would be very grateful to have an opportunity to share my experience with the Royal Commission particularly of what treatment has not been helpful to survivors..

Over the last few months I have read the transcripts of most of the case studies. Initially it was to support a colleague and friend who will give a statement connected with Case Study 29 who experienced extreme abuse within the Jehovah Witnesses.

Recommendations to the Royal Commission:

- Explore the Heal For Life Model for Survivors
- Conduct a Case Study for Psychiatric Service Survivors
- All services engaged in providing services Mental Health, Drug & Alcohol, Counselling, Out of Home Care, Police, Paramedics, Courts etc etc etc.

In finishing, I would like to highly commend the Commission the invaluable work you are doing and the dignity and respect you give to survivors.

Yours faithfully,

Ros Thomas