

Partnerships toward recovery

26-28 April 2006

VICSERV & Richmond Fellowship mental health conference



Melissa Glasscock reports ...

ON THE 26 - 28 April VICSERV (the peak body for Psychiatric Disability Rehabilitation and Support Services in Victoria) and the Richmond Fellowship worked together to deliver the 2006 International Mental Health conference in Melbourne. The theme throughout the conference was Partnership Toward Recovery. It was a chance for individuals and organisations to hear the voices of people living with a mental illness and their stories of recovery. Their aim was to promote and encourage participation from consumers and organisations that work and live by the psychosocial rehabilitation model. Throughout the conference we were provided with first-hand experiences of recovery—what individuals and organisations have done to overcome obstacles and integrate back into the community. More than 120 workshops were presented over the three day period. Unfortunately, I couldn't attend all of them! However, these were three of the highlights ...

Keynote address

It was inspiring to see Patricia Deegan's keynote address on the first day. Patricia is a psychiatric survivor, having first being diagnosed with schizophrenia as a teenager. She received her doctorate in clinical psychology in 1984 and now is an activist in consumer/ survivor/ expatient movement and co-founder of the National Empowerment Centre. Pat has given keynote addresses, lectures and workshops across the USA,

Canada, Europe, Scandinavia, Australia, New Zealand and Israel.

Pat described her life after being diagnosed with schizophrenia by likening it to the growth of a tiny sea rose which grows in the chilly climates of northern America where she lives. She used the strength and courage of the sea rose as a metaphor for her journey of recovery (see excerpt from her speech on next page). Throughout her healing process Pat emphasised the importance of the spirit of hope.

The Politics of Asylum

Another guest speaker was Sandy Jeffs who presented a paper on "The Politics of Asylum." Sandy has lived with schizophrenia for 27 years and regularly speaks at schools, universities and other community groups. She is also a prize winning poet whose work explores mental illness, domestic violence and midweek ladies tennis.

Sandy talked about the deinstitutionalisation of asylums and questioned whether we, as a community, really care for the "mad", or are we just searching for a cheap quick fix to cure "madness". She describes today's model as "fast psychiatry", as it has a fixation on the brain and not the mind.

However, in no way did she propose that we should go back to large institutions. She suggests a model where we could perhaps provide refuges dotted around the cities and suburbs. These refuges could offer a variety of treatments and healing therapies in accommodating housing, with gardens and good food; in other words a place designed for people to heal.

See Sandy's poem "Asylum" on the next page.

What Do They Do?

The Richmond Fellowship of Victoria (RFV) Model Supporting Recovery

Another feature presentation was from the Richmond Fellowship at Denham House who gave a presentation on young people and their journey through rehabilitation.

Denham House is a transitional psychosocial rehabilitation service located in Melbourne. The program works with young people ranging from the ages of 16-25 years who have experienced serious mental illness and who may be at risk of homelessness, suicide or self-harm. Psychosocial rehabilitation involves working with the whole person, recognising their strengths and integrating hope into their daily activities.

The focus of the program is to empower and connect the young people with the community. This is done via learning new living skills, promoting emotional growth to deal with mental illness, exercise, working closely with family and carers and interacting with the community. The residents can stay up to a period of two years and then it is hoped they will be ready to progress onto the Outreach program, which provides ongoing housing support focusing on independence.

There was a major focus throughout the presentation of working with families, carers and significant others, as this plays an important part in the resident's recovery. In 2005 Denham house won the Best Practise in Mental Health for support given to carers. ✕

For copies of the conference papers visit: www.vicserv.org.au

Asylum

by Sandy Jeffs

Guest speaker at 2006 VICSERV conference

*In a meditative mood, I sit here
and reflect on a world, sequestered
from the driving, droning masses.
Here, far from the maddening crowd,
with lunatics of all kinds, I share moments
of longing to be far from here. I share moments
of great intensity, of great sorrow,
and of great otherness I can give to words.*

*Call it sanctuary, a refuge, or shelter,
call it what you will.
But here, I am God, the Devil, the Queen;
here we are imagined souls of grandeur
acting the parts beautifully, empathetically.
So that we mutter the incomprehensible,
yet know we are here in retreat for a while.*

*No other place offers this necessary respite
from the rationalized, dizzying world,
except perhaps Gray's country churchyard,
which provides a serene abode for the
dwellers of the "lowly beds" and "narrow cells".
Although some of us join these dead people,
mostly we ride the storms here in our asylum.*

*This is not to romanticise our retreat,
for many faults are here;
for many fears are realised in horrific detail.
Sometimes there is great suffering and no succour,
but here we have come to know of the fickleness
of life's character, and, for the time being,
we remain removed from the world,
here in our sanctum.*

*We demand our right to asylum,
for somewhere to be at those times
when turmoil and chaos destroy
our minds and those beyond.
Here we sail away with the wind in our hair,
and we are the Ship of Fools.
We embark on a journey to all asylums
through all ages, where we meet
with fools and jesters who show us the way.*

excerpt from
Pat Deegan's keynote address
at 2006 VICSERV conference

From her paper: **Recovery, Rehabilitation
and the Conspiracy of Hope**

THERE is always a lesson for me in the cycle of the seasons. I am always reminded that growth happens in a context, and that, in order for growing things to emerge, environments must change to accommodate that growth. One spring, after a long and icy winter, I wrote this:

It is springtime and hope is everywhere. It is springtime and it feels like all living things are trembling into being, still wet and new and fragile and determined to put down roots and grow.

I think of a sea rose I watched growing out at a beach near my home this past summer. It is a fragile and tender life, that sea flower. I love to see it. At dawn it moves in a slow upsway as it turns toward the morning star. That sea rose is a light seeker. It bends toward the light. It is a light-seeker whose roots reach way down into the darkness of the earth. In fact, it was in darkness that his new life began.

Way back in January and February, when the icy winds lashed across those dunes and the days were short and the light gave no warmth, even then, way down under the ground, this new life was waiting. Nobody could see it, nobody was there to witness it, and yet this promise of a sea flower waited. It waited in that icy darkness for the sands to begin to thaw. It waited for the rains to come and loosen the earth. And then, ever so slowly, it began to stir. Moving one grain of sand at a time, it began to grow.

It did not grow straight toward the light at first. No. First its growth sought a downward course, reaching, stretching, blindly groping through shifting sands to find a solid place. A place to be rooted. A good soil to cling to and to be nurtured by. A home soil that could sustain it, even in driving rains and tormenting winds.

And then, having rooted itself in this way, the sea rose began its journey toward the light. Poking through the darkness, that sea flower emerged tiny and lovely and insistent and courageous. On frail and trembling limbs, this small thing rose to a new life...

That sea rose teaches us a lot about hope. It teaches us that hope emerges out of darkness. It teaches us that hope can grow in nurturing environments that allow one to become rooted and secure. ✕

Visit: www.patdeegan.com