

News from Around the Province

Oh What A Night!!!

by Nancy Daley, CMHA Fort Frances

“Stand up comedy? In front of a live audience? You must be kidding! Not in a million years.” Those were some of my initial thoughts. But when I started talking to our members, consumer/survivors of the mental health system, and listening to their responses, I decided to throw my hat into the ring too. If they can do it, I can do it and so began our journey into comedy.

Back in October of 2006 we began brainstorming for something different to do that would promote mental illness/mental health awareness during mental health week. We had just been informed that there was to be a Passionate Eye documentary about the Stand Up For Mental Health Program and one of our consumer groups had worked with the founder, David Granirer, and done stand up comedy for their consumer conference. They had a blast doing it and found it to be very rewarding. So, we decided that this would be a great way to reach the public and talk about mental illness. We had “our people” contact “David’s people” and hammer out a contract.

We determined that April 20 would be a good day to do our public comedy night – just before mental health week and far enough away that we could feel brave about doing it.

I began talking to people and recruiting them to become part of the act. We ended up with a group of 9 people who initially embraced the idea. Three of these folks had previously performed routines for the consumer’s conference. The rest of us were venturing into brand new territory.

The focus of Stand Up For Mental Health is to help people who have mental illness build confidence and self-esteem while also educating people about stigma. So we had to prepare material about our own mental illnesses and be prepared to “come out of the closet” in a very public way, but with humour.

David worked with each of us individually by email and telephone. He basically interviewed us and got information about us and then drafted out our acts from the info he obtained. He was great to work with and gave us all very good feedback about how we were doing.

We had booked the banquet room in the best hotel in town and were selling tickets. Newspaper, radio and television promotions and interviews were occurring. People were going to come and see the show. To add to the growing anxiety of the performers, we also agreed to have the local television station video the performance so that it could play on the local channel after the event. Everyone signed the media release forms so we were committed.

As the performance date grew nearer and we realized that over 100 tickets had sold, we all realized that we were actually going to do this. We were getting nervous and questioning our sound judgement about agreeing to be a part of this project. There were comments like, **“I can’t do this.” “I don’t think I can stand up in front of a room full of people and try to make them laugh.” “What if no one laughs?” “Maybe no one will come.” “I changed my mind – I’m not doing it.”** But – each and every one of us did it. We got up on that stage and MADE PEOPLE LAUGH!

We had one rehearsal the night before the big show and one the day of. Even if we didn’t feel ready – we were going on in a few, painfully short hours.

The doors opened at 6:00 so that the audience could come in and get a beverage – ply them with liquor – loosen them up. The show started at 7:00.

177 people paid money to come and see us and to be entertained! This was awesome. I cannot express in words what it felt like to stand up on that stage and make people laugh. I was actually proud to have a mental illness. I belonged to a group that had very specific criteria. Not “just anyone” can join.

The audience laughed, cried and clapped. We received a standing ovation.

After the show, and for weeks to follow, the performers were stopped on the street and commended for their performance and for sharing such intimate parts of themselves in a way that was both sensitive and funny. There was not one person among the audience who did not relate to something that they heard on that stage. Two people approached us and told us of their own mental health problems. Others shared about their family members. It was obvious that this performance made a huge impact on not only the performers, but also the public.

The performers themselves felt such a sense of pride and accomplishment that it was visible in their carriage and demeanour. They felt good about themselves. They felt like they had overcome a huge obstacle and that they were finally recognized for contributing something of themselves to enrich other people’s lives.

Due to the success of this first comedy night, a group of us decided to approach the local Canadian Mental Health Association Board of Directors and request permission to fund raise to pay for a year contract with David Granirer so that we could bring other people into the program and expose more of the public to it. Those of us involved really embraced the power of this venue for educating people and building confidence and self-esteem. As a result of our proposal to the Board of Directors, we were granted the funds necessary to hire David for a year. Yes – we will carry on – I feel as if Fort Frances and District is on the brink of something exciting and positive. It is something that will bring only positives – to consumers, family members, advocacy groups and the general public. Stand

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