



# A Path to Recovery Paved with Movies

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Saunders

Movie Monday started as a sparky idea from a guy recovering from a severe depression and second suicide attempt. I was becoming slightly hypomanic, part of my manic-depressive illness — the creative, optimistic side of a roller coaster emotional ride I'd been on much of my life. Finally I was on a better mood stabilizer and the right kind of support. And I was hot on a new scheme.

My wife was keen that our life get back to normal. "Look after yourself, your family, and your gardening business," she said. But I'd discovered a 100-seat lecture auditorium in the basement of Eric Martin Pavilion in Victoria with a video projector, and the idea of showing films there for patients and ex-patients had captured my imagination. When people gather for popular film entertainment, there are a lot of other cool things that can spring from that. Now, seven years later, 420 events later, my day job (landscape maintenance gardening) is thriving, as is our family, and Movie Monday is still a vital interest and creative expression for me.

Just a month out of hospital, with no funding and no long term plan, my friend Peter and I started things going. It was much to the credit of the hospital's audio-visual staff that they even considered allowing me free use of the facility. I reasoned that it would be a health-related event, but even I thought it was a bit chancy. I realized right away that the key was consistency. The entertainment had to be there regularly, so people would make it a habit and a community would build.

At first I publicized it through the hospital and my support group. When just a few people showed up, I broadened my promotion to hostels and drop-in centres downtown. The first few months, I got butterflies in my stomach every time I thought of having to be there next Monday with a show for the expectant audience. For a person with mood swings, consistency can be a scary prospect. But I was enthusiastic about movies and since it was my idea — there's nothing like ownership — I was able to make it work and pursue those goals I had imagined from the start. I treated it like my gardening business: with relentless promotion, focus, attention to detail, and thrift.

A big leap in commitment and exposure to the public was made when, hoping to raise funds for better equipment, I was featured in an article in Victoria's city paper. It was a turning point when I weighed the risk of talking about my illness publicly. It's been a very positive move for me and for my family. One of the best results of this experiment has been to shed all the baggage that comes with the usual secrecy, and to make a constructive thing of our family's challenges with mental illness. Weekly now, I see the healing effect of that openness.

Quite early on I realized films could stimulate discussion about mental illness.

When I showed *Benny & Joon*, along with a facilitated discussion, this was the first time I'd presented a popular film with a mental illness-related theme. The discussion was very wide-ranging and involved people with personal experiences of mental illness who had lots to say. This was their forum, and I learned a lot. After that, Movie Monday's schedule has always included a rich peppering of such films — which include discussion opportunities and special guests — like *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest*, *Shine*, and *Curtis' Charm*. In January, we'll be presenting our third *Reel Madness Film Festival* in Victoria: five days of films and discussions about mental illness and recovery.

I also realized early that just showing up week after week, addressing the audience, consistently putting up eclectic, creative programming, talking about mental illness and health, making at least part of our psychiatric hospital a friendly approachable place — has a pervasive effect. Even though we have a small venue, the ripples of information, positive attitude, and hope travel out into our community.

And the ripples come back to me. What I've gained is a whole other identity. Where before I felt like I was hanging on to a thin pretense for living, now I have a unique opportunity to express myself artistically and intellectually. I've learned to express myself on paper effectively and speak publicly. I have lots of reasons to interact with artists, filmmakers, and with movers and shakers in the mental health community, both peers and professionals. I've been more stable and happy than ever before. Movie Monday has given me a platform to make something good of all the losses and dreary experiences. Our family is proud of dealing well with an illness that has haunted my family of origin and could have claimed me and even my children. I feel I've turned that fate around. Last June, I celebrated a 50th birthday I never thought I'd reach. I've still got an illness that I have to manage. It's never lost on me though, walking through the hospital to set up for another event, that it's great to come back into this place each week, not as a patient, but as a provider of a service, feeling like a winner.

For more info on Movie Monday or for a schedule of *Reel Madness* events, go to [www.islandnet.com/mm](http://www.islandnet.com/mm). ■

Bruce lives in Victoria, BC and is the founder of Movie Monday and the Reel Madness Film Festival.

▶▶ Bruce Saunders (right) and his wife Laurel (left) in costume for Movie Monday's "Sing Along Sound of Music" which ran July 31/00.



