

Movie Monday: Shining a light on mental illness

BY LOUISE DICKSON
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Bruce Saunders grew up in a family that couldn't talk about mental illness.

"And we suffered a lot from mental illness," Saunders says candidly. "It all had to be hush-hush."

His sister, who was diagnosed with manic depression, committed suicide when he was 24. Saunders thought her death was inevitable.

"It wasn't until many years later we started learning more and realized there's a lot we could have done for her. Once you know, it's hard to walk away and let everyone figure it out for themselves."

Movie Monday at Eric Martin Pavilion for the mentally ill is Saunders' way of bringing people out of isolation and passing on knowledge. Every Monday at 6:30 p.m., Saunders shows films to engage, interest and provoke his audience.

"I'm working to break down the

stigma surrounding mental illness, to get people talking about suicide, depression and schizophrenia in the open as if it's a normal thing, not a shameful thing," says the 56-year-old movie buff and former psychiatric patient.

In June 1993, Saunders was admitted to the Eric Martin after a "nearly successful" attempt at suicide. During his time on the ward, he discovered a 100-seat theatre and started showing movies to patients as an alternative to their piped-in television shows and to help them cope with long evenings and drab weekends.

Thirteen years later, Movie Monday is still going strong. It's for ex-patients, patients-to-be and people who just want to see a good movie. Admission is by donation. The well-heeled can donate what they please. Others give what they can. "Some have even put in a chocolate loonie," says Saunders.

People can watch videos in the comfort of their home, but many relish the

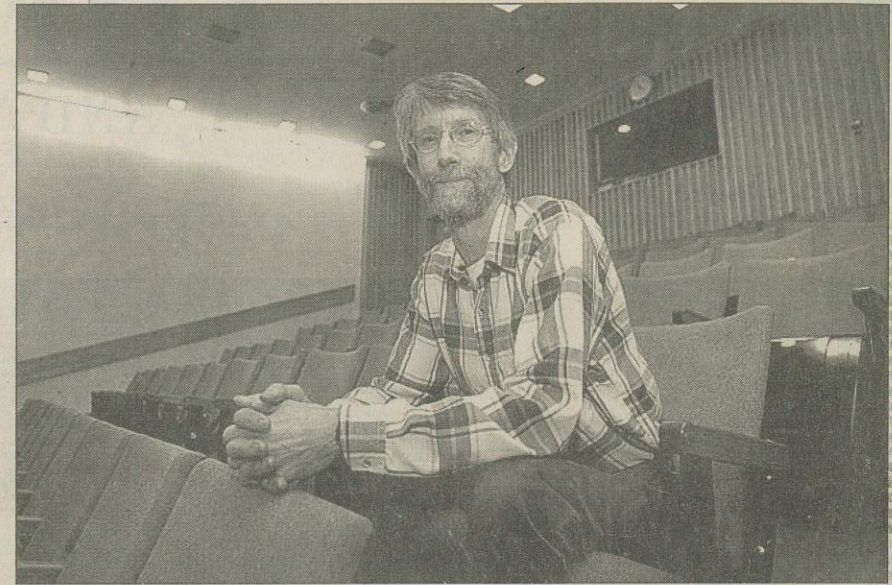
experience of watching a film with people who have lived the kind of life portrayed in movies.

"People in our audience can talk about *A Beautiful Mind* from the experience of a schizophrenic," says Saunders. "Usually, when we show a film about schizophrenia, someone jumps up and says 'If Jesus Christ had tried to preach today, would he have been slapped in [the Eric Martin]?' And someone else will say, 'I'm a minister and I have schizophrenia and I knew the difference.'"

Movie Monday is not just about mental illness.

For example, on Jan. 29, Saunders will show the Vancouver film *Fetching Cody*, which tells the tale of a young man who keeps going back in time to try to save his girlfriend from an overdose in the Downtown Eastside.

"It's fun to watch and provocative about the issues of the Downtown Eastside, but it doesn't rub your nose in it."



Bruce Saunders is the guiding force behind Movie Monday at the Eric Martin Pavilion for the mentally ill.
Darren Stone/Times Colonist

Filmmakers Carolyn Allain and David Ray will attend the screenings and answer questions from the audience.

"That's when you really get people thinking, and that's what I live for," says Saunders.

Some people would never take a chance and watch a movie at a psychiatric hospital. They might worry, like Saunders' children did, that the patients would be scary.

"But there's nothing to worry about. You realize that pretty quick," he says. "We've only called security four times in 13 years."

"One of the biggest reasons I'm doing this is to change people's ideas about mental illness. These are just ordinary people. Occasionally, some people are a little different in their behaviour. But it's a good exercise to get used to that, get over it and accept people."