

in a nutshell

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I recalled a conversation I'd had with Fran Phillips a couple of years prior to that time. I was working as one of the two Drop-In Centre coordinators at Trutch and finally the 6th Avenue Drop-In centres. I found myself working with people who were very much draining of my energy and who seemed to be accomplishing very little for themselves. I was fairly depressed and shaky myself. I asked Fran did people ever get it together at MPA because it often didn't look that way. I would see the same people coming in and out of the Drop-In, seemingly repeating the same kinds of behaviour that wasn't doing them much good.

She said that small changes like decision-making in minor matters take weeks and months to occur, while major changes like going back to work or school take much longer. Also that a lot of people did, indeed, go on to other things.

How that relates to me going to Langara and this article is that I feel in the last 4 years or so, I've really made some gains in my own life in terms of finding out what my problems were, doing something about them, setting out in some sort of positive direction to do something with my life. I feel that in a large way MPA contributed to that, so what this article is about is sort of a bit of my life history and the place that MPA had in it. MPA wasn't the only factor in working things out, of course, but it played a big part.

When I went into the larger community to attend classes at Langara, I was told by a chap in my class that he felt that the Mental Patients Association should be investigated in some way and that something should be done about it because people weren't getting any help there and he had some other vague kinds of criticism.



You CAN get there from here

I guess what he, and I pointed it out to him, failed to recognize and probably what other people fail to recognize also, is that the greatest majority of us who come to MPA have been through various kinds of professional, establishment mental health experiences and have just not been helped all that much or have not been helped enough. It can't be expected that MPA, which is basically a group of some very concerned, some less concerned, expatients and others, is going to solve all the mental health and other problems of the people who come to us.

I think what MPA does provide is friendship for some, probably for a majority of people; housing for some people; a place to go;

somewhere to get help, with almost anything there's some one at MPA who will try to help and if they don't they can find out.

That's a hell of a lot more than lots of other places offer. You don't need an appointment, we don't adhere to office hours, the people who work here and the members aren't on a professional-client basis, they're your friends, they're your enemies, whatever, but they are people.

I think that is quite a bit. A lady said to me about 2 weeks ago in Riverview that weekends in the city are pretty unhappy times if you don't know anyone, especially Sundays. They're lonely, dull, very limited if you're on a limited income. Very much like the

hospital. MPA, to some extent, meets that kind of need.

When I came to MPA almost 3½ years ago, I was newly discharged from hospital, had gotten a little room in the West End, not a very satisfactory place, a house-keeping room and the kind you can't really make an impression on, a very drab and dreary kind of place. I had no friends, was separated, and on the way to a divorce from my wife.

I had heard from her about MPA and I went there. I remember Glenn Underwood being the first person to talk to me and ask me who I was and just sort of chatting. At that time I found it difficult to stay in one place for any length of time because of the medication I

DAVE BEAMISH

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was taking. It was kind of amusing, the way MPA works. Not too long thereafter, I met a girl at the Drop-In who was displaying very similar symptoms to my own and sure enough she was on a medication that didn't allow her to sit still very long either and so we used to go for walks around the neighbourhood, both of us, attempting to walk off the artificial physical anxiety produced by the various drugs that we were taking. That is sort of what MPA is about.

It has provided me with employment several times, opportunities to test myself. It's given me some really good, close friends, several of whom are no longer connected with MPA. It gave me a place to live where there were no or minimal demands on me, where people were supportive, where there was help if I needed it. I'm grateful for that.

There were long periods in the last few years that I spent holed up in my room in the West End and elsewhere. People would come down and try to visit me, some wrote letters, one guy even climbed in the window. People encouraged me to come back. When, later, I got into a manic episode and was threatening people and had a lot of people frightened and was causing a lot of noise and disturbance, MPA got me committed to the hospital which was the best thing that could happen. Happily, this time I was put on a medication that's done me some good, has enabled me to work out some of my problems, to be more stable, less depressed and generally to function pretty well.

When I came to MPA I had no idea what I was going to do with my life. All I thought about steadily for a good year or so was suicide. Every day when I woke up that's what I thought of and I spent most of my days sleeping, eating, reading, contemplating suicide. That was it.

Now I've completed the program at Langara which qualifies me to work with pre-school age children, which I'll be doing in the fall. I'm working as a Drop-In Centre coordinator right now at MPA. I've taken on various personal projects, to get myself into better physical condition, to learn a musical instrument, improve my living space, to do a few other things, and all these things are happening.

Interestingly enough, my plans as I've made them have come to fruition. I've been able to follow through on things and to me, that's something miraculous. I've never had that in my life before.

It was certainly a combination of chance and circumstance, good fortune oft' times that helped me but it was also, I think, having around me a lot of people who, even if they didn't care, were there. They were somebody that I knew. When I went into the Drop-In they recognized me, they said, Hi Dave. That's a hell of a lot better than sitting in the middle of nowhere in Vancouver.

Now there are community mental health teams. When you come out of hospital there is some follow-up. When I came out of hospital 3 years ago or so, there was bugger-all follow-up. I saw a social worker once a week for 2 weeks and that was it. She brought me Ladies' Home Journals and I saw someone at the Out-Patients' Clinic who was absolutely useless to me. At that time, I had a psychiatrist who was not only little good to me but did me some harm in terms of his advice. It was through the MPA atmosphere and some of the opinions and ideas of people at MPA that I was able to recognize the psychiatrist had really done me harm and that I didn't have to feel guilty about my "failure", that actually his advice had been very poor.

That's something I likely couldn't have gotten anywhere else. There's quite a span of opinion and ideology in MPA, from the very extreme to the very conservative, and I think that's a healthy thing. Doubtless it has led us into error at times but the exposure to ideas about mental health and psychiatry has been of use to our members and to other people. There are people I've had contact with in the community who have been able to benefit, perhaps, from some of the things I've learned through MPA.

When I applied for the program at Langara there were some 250 applicants for 20-odd seats. Knowing they would be strong on emotional stability as a criterion for working with young children, when I came to the application question, "Have you ever received psychiatric treatment" I lied, of course and said, "no, not me, not ever".

However, once I got into the program, in conversation with one of the instructors, I told her about my background. Eventually the whole class found out at a time when Fran Phillips came out to speak to our psychology class. I found, generally, that no-one's attitude changed very much toward me from what it had been, just because they found out I'd been in hospital. Some people were somewhat interested, some couldn't have cared less. Also, in that class there were some people who weren't too together in some ways themselves.

I guess that I'm saying that in terms of my own personal experience, in the distant past and recently, yeah, there's a stigma to having been in mental hospital but if people are given a chance to know you as a person before knowing you as an ex-patient, that they're able to put that into perspective somehow.

That even applies to welfare. I remember, a long time ago, starting work at a place after having been on welfare for a time. In those days I was married and I felt guilty about being on the dole. We were working overtime one day and I came into this cafeteria setting and here was this fellow expounding to others the wastefulness of welfare and the fact, according to him that most people on welfare were not deserving of it.

So I told him that I had just come off welfare, that in fact people on welfare were not making great bundles of money and I told him what some of the rates were. He shut up pretty quickly and said, "Well, you know, I wasn't talking about people like you." And he probably meant that because, somehow, he didn't see me as

fitting that stereotype. That would probably apply to almost anyone. No doubt there's still prejudice in the community but I believe most people, given half a chance, don't treat you all that badly.

Another practical way in which MPA was helpful to me was when I applied to Langara. I needed letters of reference of course. There was a big hole in my working life at that time, of several years or so. Between my V.O.P. experiences and 2 brief episodes as Drop-In Centre coordinator, I

was able to get Dick Betts to write up a letter of reference. I remember during the group interviews we had as candidates for the program, the instructor interviewing me was more interested in my MPA experience than anything else.

What I'd like to say to those people within MPA who spend a lot of time criticizing it is that certainly MPA is far from perfect but it's structured in such a way that if you have legitimate complaints you can at least bring them to the attention of other people in a formal way at a meeting. If you're not able to function well in meetings then you can talk to someone who is, enlist their support and get them to bring up your complaint at a meeting. Or at least go and talk to people directly and to hell with the meetings and see what comes of it.

If you're using MPA a fair amount, think of this: where the hell would you be if MPA didn't exist? It would leave a gap in my social and emotional life if MPA wasn't here.

To people who are not active in MPA but feel negatively toward the organization I would ask you to spend some real time around the place over a period of weeks or months and just see what goes on. Whether anything is done for anyone, whether people ever do help themselves or others.

Apart from that, I'd like to encourage anyone who's going back to school or trying to reestablish themselves through work or anything else in the community, to go ahead and do that.

There may be times you'll wish you hadn't. If you haven't done anything like that for a while, don't be really upset or bummed out if it doesn't work right off. If it doesn't work the first time you can still give it another crack. It doesn't come that easily.

If you are successful it really pays off in a big way. It does a hell of a lot for your self-esteem. It makes you feel worthwhile.

For the longest time I spent day in and day out sitting around the Drop-In Centre, going out for coffee with someone, going for a beer the odd time and really feeling like I was wasting

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Dave raps about MPA

away. I don't think that's really true of many people. I think during those long periods of time that you go through where nothing seems to be happening that in fact, often you are dealing with things, you are trying to work things out in your mind, that somehow or other, in the end, you can often accomplish something with yourself.

Not always. I have a strong feeling that maybe some people just don't want enough to change or make any changes. Some people just aren't able, for whatever reason. They feel so badly about themselves or don't have the strength, that they just don't make it, period. Some die.

Just because I've been able to do a few things lately, I'm not trying to tell anyone to "Go and do thou likewise", but I certainly wish anyone the best in efforts to reestablish themselves or give a new direction to their life or whatever euphemism I might use for a tough struggle.

During the time I was going to school I found I had a lot of support from people at MPA. Enquiring as to how I was doing and saying, hey, that's great and some people saying, well, jeez, I didn't think you'd actually do it but you've gone ahead and done it. That helped too.

I guess the reason this has become a testimonial is

that once I finished the course and came back and started working here, I became sensitive to the complaints of people around MPA. Because I feel that oftentimes the criticism is not just and that sometimes our favourite preoccupation is taking a slam at the faults in the Mental Patients Association when in fact once in a while we could give ourselves a pat on the back. When we slam the place we slam ourselves. We are responsible.

MPA is a big part of my life. I'd like to make it a smaller part in the future and have a lot more involvement other places. I think that'll start in September

when I begin working in nursery school but it will be impossible for me to lose touch with the place. I have too many friends here and it's an awfully handy place to go sometimes when there's just nothing else to do.

As I finish this transcription it is 2:30 a.m. here in the Drop-In. Fred Fisher just told me to "put a little loving kindness in" so I will.

Jackie Mason, the comic, has a beautiful line: "I'd like to wish myself the best of luck". You too.

Dave Beamish.

Come to the MPA drop-in centre for the day where you are welcome to sit around and talk to ex-patients, play pool, take part in any activities, drink coffee, use the phone, etc.

MPA co-ordinators will be glad to talk to you about housing in Vancouver, your legal problems, where to find inexpensive restaurants at reasonable prices, places to go for entertainment or dancing, hostels where you can spend the night if you have a weekend pass, and bus tours of the city.

HOW DO YOU GET HERE?

Catch the 933 Lougheed Pt. Coquitlam bus at the Tuck Shop. Get off at Hastings and Granville Sts. in downtown Vancouver. Transfer to a 10 UBC or a 7 Dunbar bus and get off at Broadway and Yew Sts. Then walk down Yew to 6th Ave.

To return to Riverview: catch a No. 14 Hastings bus at Broadway and Arbutus. Get off at Hastings & Granville. Transfer to the 933 Lougheed - Cedar bus which runs every half hour directly to Riverview.

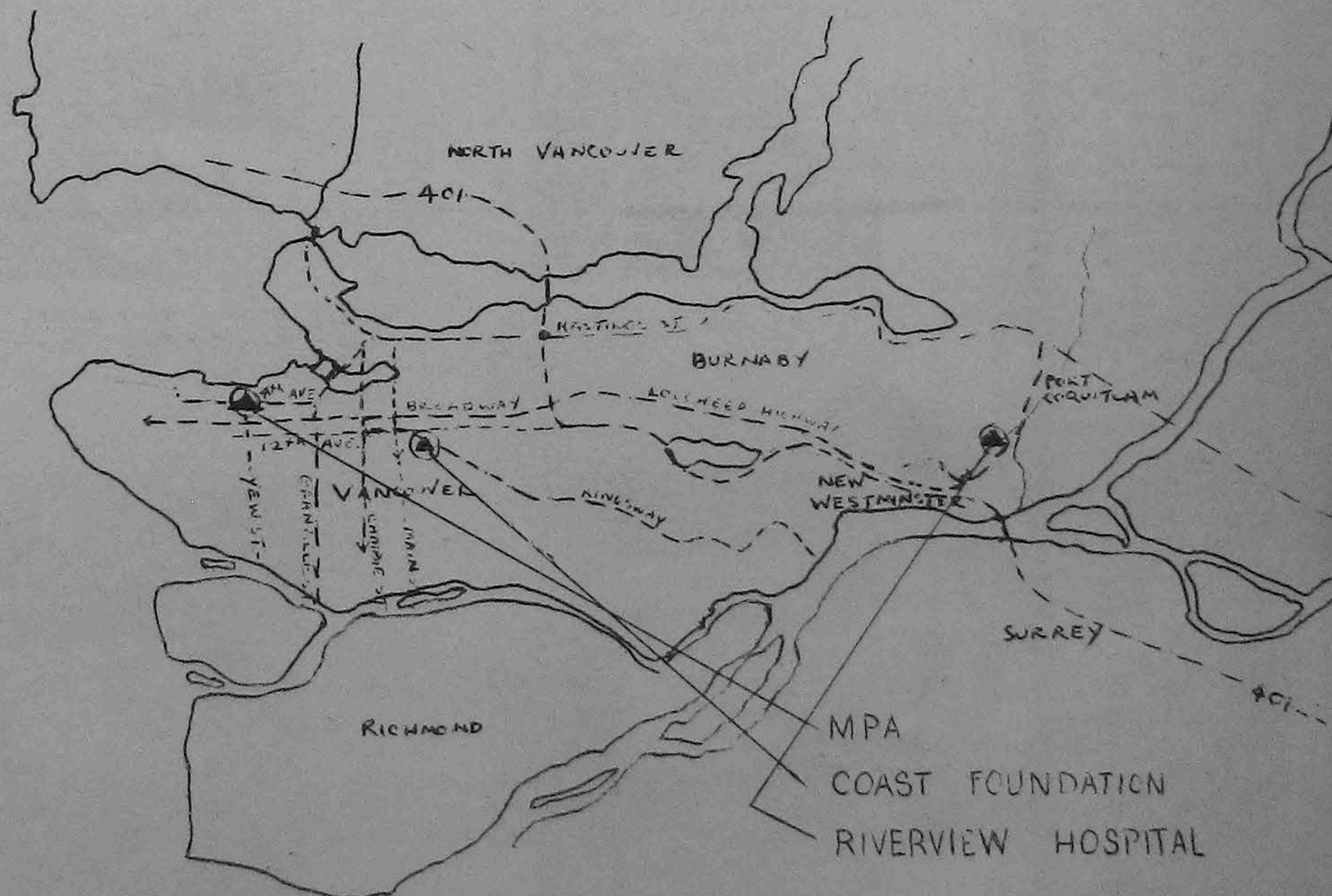
WHERE ELSE TO GO?

If you'd like to go to the Coast Foundation Drop-in Centre, 876 E. 18th Ave., travel to town the same way but get off the 933 Lougheed bus at Main and Hastings. Walk up to Pender & Main and transfer to 19 Kingsway. Get off at 18th and Kingsway.

HOW MUCH DOES IT COST?

Buy a 50¢ bus pass on Sunday and you can travel on it all day. At other times fare is 25¢ from 10-3 every day and after 7 every night. It's 40¢ other times.

got a day pass?
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come to mpa



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