

Be the first kid on your ward

Roving correspondent, Franc David, returned from a tour of mental patients liberation-land in San Francisco to report to the May 29th business meeting that there is nothing like MPA in the Bay area. Which got me to thinking that there is nothing like MPA anywhere in the States. Most American mental patients groups pretty well stick to political work and haven't developed much in the way of service programs. This is probably explained by the fact that services cost money, a commodity that American politicians don't like to waste on poor people.

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But, so far as I know, there are no other democratic mental patients service organizations in Canada. Why? There are certainly plenty of mental patients in other Canadian cities (ever been to Toronto?) and the treatment they receive is nothing short of abysmal.

We raise the issue not to be self-congratulatory, but to encourage ex-patients in other places to organize themselves and to realize that it is possible. We often receive letters, especially after a national TV or radio program on MPA from people who express interest in starting similar groups. They want to know how MPA started and what they can do.

How to start

Our early experience will probably be helpful to others, so let us review it briefly and draw from it some general principles that other groups can consider. MPA began with a number of patients in a day hospital program. Organizing within a psychiatric program is a good, though not essential, place to start. What is needed is several people, as few as two or three, who have some minimal organizing skills and who will make a commitment of at least three months without pay to getting the group started. This means doing full-time work, slugging through all the setbacks, the apathy and the frustrations no matter how large they are.

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body policies of democratic participation which place the decision-making power in the group. This doesn't deny the importance of leadership (it is very important), but the group must know that it has the power to control its leaders and its fate.

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Collective power

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decision, the more important to involve the group.

Serve the people

The core group should also establish policies regarding the general purpose of the organization. The cardinal purpose must be to serve the interests of patients, not to help professionals do their work. It's crucial not to get sucked into the tailwind of professional organizations. The group must maintain a real autonomy and be prepared to fight on behalf of patients, whoever this brings you into conflict with.

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Rent for the first month or two can be paid by the core group or, if possible, by a grant. It is very important not to recruit a larger membership before the core group is committed to doing most of the hard work involved in seeking funds, finding a house, getting donations of furniture, etc. Wherever possible, involve the new members in this work, but expect to do most of it yourself. The more the project becomes a reality, the more others will pitch in, but initially the organization will run on the energy of a few. (This does not deny members' involvement in decision making, which again, is what it's all about. At first, many make, or at least ratify, decisions while few do the work. That's okay.)

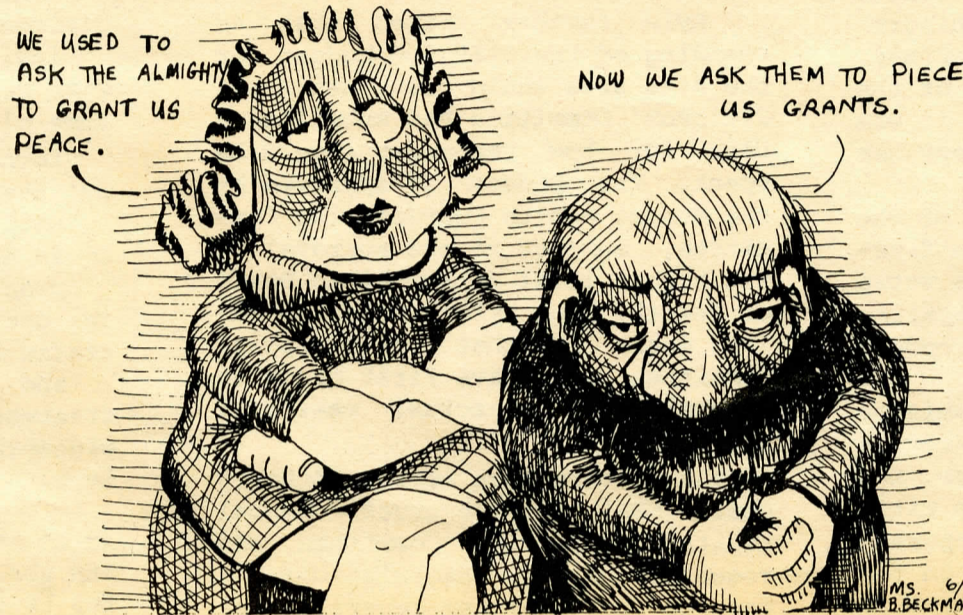
A sexy issue

A good place to begin looking for funds is the Company of Young Canadians. They supported us first and came through with a minimum of red-tape. If the core group can convince CYC about the quality of their ideas and the strength of their commitment, a grant is very likely. Also, you can get in touch with us for suggestions about where else to apply for money, letters of support, etc.

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to set up a small growth on the body of the professional establishment, but to create a real, independent alternative geared toward uncompromising struggle against the oppression suffered by patients.

When the core group is agreed on basic policies, two courses of action ought to be initiated. One, start seeking funds, and two, begin recruiting a larger membership. Funds are essential, whether they're from private donations or government grants, because people will respond to actual services and this invariably means finding a physical location, which costs money.

Paper organizations get nowhere -- except on paper. The ideal physical structure is a house, just a plain ordinary residential house.

nutshell

IN A NUTSHELL can always use staff, people to help with typing, layout, editing, proof-reading, all the tasks that go along with putting out the paper. If you would like to help and learn newspaper skills in the process, contact Stan at the Drop-In Centre. We get many requests for subscriptions to IN A NUTSHELL. We have no fixed rates for this but any person who is able to contribute towards the costs may do so. IN A NUTSHELL is free to all people in hospitals and to all hospital staff as well as MPA members or anyone else who has been in hospital. All movement and community service grass - roots organizations can get the paper free. Write and tell us who you are and where you are staying.

IN A NUTSHELL is the official publication of the MENTAL PATIENTS ASSOCIATION. Our address is 1982 W. 6th Ave., Vancouver, B.C. The telephone number is 738-5177.

LETTERS TO US

Dear Staff,

We subscribe to masses of newspapers and magazines, and some of them arrive and are then stashed away somewhere, out of sight and unread.

But your newsletter which we've been receiving for nothing, we always read and enjoy, making appreciative comments to one another. ("We" is my husband and myself.) It is lively, candid, informative, humorous. Your writers are serious and urgent without being solemn.

Here's a cheque to pay for past issues and, we hope, for some future issues.

I hope you'll all want to go right on reporting, arguing, examining, laughing, crying and generally laying it on the line.

Best wishes to you all.

Irene Howard

Dear Nutshell:

Thank you very much for forwarding me a copy of your publication, "In a Nutshell", which I found most interesting.

Very best wishes for the future of your paper.

Rosemary Brown
M.L.A. (Burrard)

Dear Friends in Solidarity:

Thank you for your most recent copy of "In a Nutshell".

It is very neat, compact, appealing and informative as well as an interesting newsletter.

It is also truly wonderful how intent MPA is on helping people. And it is most visible how you all so readily extend yourselves.

to start a mental patients organization

The column should also ask for donations of furniture and money (though don't expect to get much), and should ask sympathetic landlords to contact you about renting a house. This is very important. Our first drop-in center was rented from an ex-patient who read the column and who turned out to be a great landlord. Most landlords would of course be totally resistant to renting you a house, so be sure that the one you find knows exactly what you want to do with it and supports your ideas. There are people like that around.

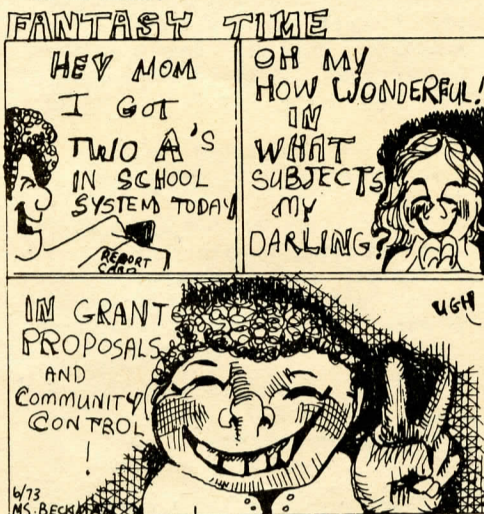
First meeting

At the first general meeting, there should be plenty of time for people to express their ideas about the need for such an organization and to talk about their own experiences. Before this discussion gets too lengthy, however, attention should be turned to the immediate work to be done. A phoning committee should be set up to inform members about developments. If no house has been found yet, a committee should be struck to look for one. Another committee can begin seeking donations of furniture, etc. Again, the core group should be involved in all these committees and should maintain contact with the members and be prepared to do the work if members' commitments prove too weak. Of course, phone lists of members' numbers should be run off (there is always a handy information center that will give you use of their facilities) and circulated among all members. A lot of phone contact should be maintained during the early weeks. People are used to groups not getting off the ground, so the feasibility of the project has to be continually reinforced until it takes on its own reality.

Keep it equal

There will probably be some sentiment at the meeting about electing a formal executive--president, secretary etc. -- and probably the core group will be nominated. This sentiment should be resisted. It is important not to develop hierarchies, but to maintain a formal equality among all members. All of our elected people have always had the same title (e.g., office co-ordinator, crafts co-ordinator, etc.) and received the same (subsistence) salary. It is very easy to develop a formal hierarchy in the early stages when there's not much commitment among the members (who really cares if there's a president

or not?), but there will come a time when members will care. By that time, if there already is a hierarchy, it may be too late to reverse the structure. So let the members live with the apprehension of not having a structured executive at the beginning. This is also good because it leaves lots of openings for new people to begin undertaking any of the work that has to be done.



Before the meeting ends, a time should be arranged for the next meeting and the phoning committee should notify all present, plus any new names acquired in the interval, just before the second meeting. Between the meetings, it is important for the core group, by this time hopefully expanded by a few, to have accomplished some concrete goals. The main thing is getting the house--this gives the group the physical reality that is essential. After that, don't be disillusioned if things go slowly. It took us six weeks to completely furnish the center. Expect some people to get tired of waiting and to quit. Don't let this shake your faith in the viability of the project. The word is perseverance. If you have enough of it, the group will eventually develop a momentum of its own.

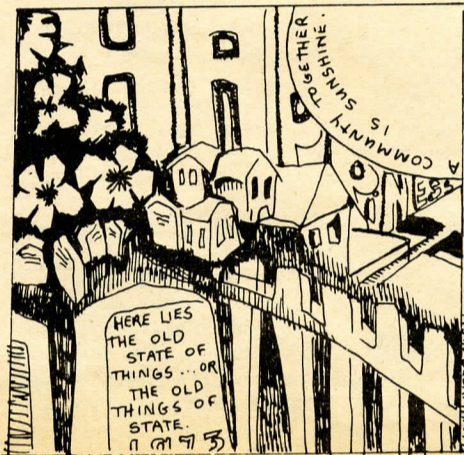
The house

These guidelines could go on endlessly, but let us wrap it up with a couple of additional points: first, more on the location and use of the house, and second, on the setting up of rules. (Once your core group has formed, we will be able to give you more information and help, likely including some funding to get you through the first month or two.)

We keep coming back to the finding of a house because without it the group has no actual base. The main thing is to avoid church basements or other locations controlled by institutions external to the group. The setting must be under the complete control of the membership, open whenever the membership wants, and used for whatever it wants. A good location is a corner lot because there are fewer adjacent neighbours. More importantly, however, is to find a neighbourhood -- usually working class -- where neighbours are least likely to get uptight about the slightly unusual use.

No red flags

This brings up an absolutely fundamental point. DON'T go to the neighbours beforehand asking for their approval. This is only waving a red flag in front of their noses. First, establish yourselves in the neighbourhood. Do this as fully as possible by endeavouring to keep all the activity inside the house. Everything possible must be done to avoid incurring the antagonism of



neighbours. Once they can see that you're not disrupting the community, they will naturally come to accept your presence, and there will be no need to go to them formally to announce your existence. Relatedly, DON'T go to the city to get a license. The house will be rented so it won't be in your name. Either the city will never know you're there, or like the neighbours, it will eventually recognize the value of your services and will turn a blind eye to any zoning regulations you might be violating.

The use of the house is somewhat more problematic. We began by combining three functions in one center: drop-in, crisis and residence. Needless to say, the place was a madhouse. However, we did survive

the early months until we could establish our first residence so that the original center could be used only for social and crisis needs.

If you do this though, you should try within the first four months to set up a second house as a residence. Although ex-patients need a social center, housing is a much more fundamental need. If the group is going to provide real bread-and-butter services, it must eventually establish places for people to live.

Group rules

Finally, let's consider setting and enforcing rules. While the tendency toward bureaucratization must be avoided at all costs, so should the opposite tendency: anarchism. Democracy doesn't mean having no rules. It means having them set and enforced by the group. There will be a good deal of chaos in the early stage and without some enforceable regulations, the group's existence will be threatened. This can happen through hassles with neighbours, minor scandals, etc.

We began with four cardinal rules, and essentially they haven't been added to during the past 2 1/2 years. They are: 1) No alcohol on the premises; 2) No illegal drugs; 3) No physical violence; and 4) No interfering with the peaceful activities of others.

Usually our group was very lenient--sometimes too lenient--in enforcing these rules. They were generally broken by someone who was very freaked-out and the group felt compassion and often declined to ban the person. At times this resulted in very serious problems, and occasionally the group's survival was threatened by the excesses of one or two people.

Since we had always been the people who had rules enforced on us by others, we did not find it easy to see ourselves as the enforcers of rules. However, our enforcement was very different from 'theirs' since ours was done democratically by the whole group. Of course, you will have to confront these issues as they arise in your own experience. But we suggest that you keep the number of rules to a minimum and that you do not shrink from enforcing them when the good of the whole group is threatened.

We hope that our experience and suggestions will be helpful. We very much want to aid any groups who are getting started. Please let us know how things are developing and whether we can be of help. Good luck. Power to the patients.

- Lanny Beckman

Your engaging lime light seems to be your amenable democratic rules, the way you are open to suggestion or advice and the way you respond to each person and situation.

In other words, MPA is the emenity of a warm climate.

What particularly caught my interest was the write-up on Mental Health Team hiring and the setting up of democratic community control.

I'm not sure that I fully understand it all. But if it means, each and everyone will have a say in decision making that affects and controls our lives; if it means doing away with class privileges and will solve peacefully but effectively the problems of inequality, then I am all for it.

Congratulations on your perseverance.

Amy Pollen



FROM THE HOMEFRONT

Transportation

Running smoothly with MPA's brand new Barrettmobile and roughly (on occasions) with our old blue farm van. More participants on the Thurs. Riverview visiting trip would be appreciated -- especially by the people in there! Regular Sat. afternoon outings so far have been to Cates & Lighthouse parks & Deep Cove, & trippy trips to continue all summer -- destination suggestions welcome.

- Joe Mandy

Living Room

Hitler started a war over what he thought was a shortage of Livingroom. MPA has been in a series of battles establishing and maintaining houses where housing for ex-mental patients did not previously exist. Serious skirmishes over funding, licensing regulations

and the need for crisis houses adds to our residents' state of uncertainty. We never know when we will have to "fold our tents...and silently steal away" because we have broken a civic by-law or find our houses running contrary to outdated provincial legislation.

Occasionally one of our residents pulls off some prank, does some shouting late at night or annoys one of the neighbours. We find later that instead of dealing with us directly people report us to the government department that controls our funds or the local member of parliament or medical health officer. At least we get attention from the very highest officials.

In response MPA has developed its diplomatic corps to arrange a "peace with honor". We expect some difficulty due to the small size of our airforce: Two pigeons and an unemployed Japanese starling. The

cont. pg. 6

Be the first kid on your ward to start a mental patients organization

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