

Are mental health clinics trail blazers or just a garden path?

by Stan Persky

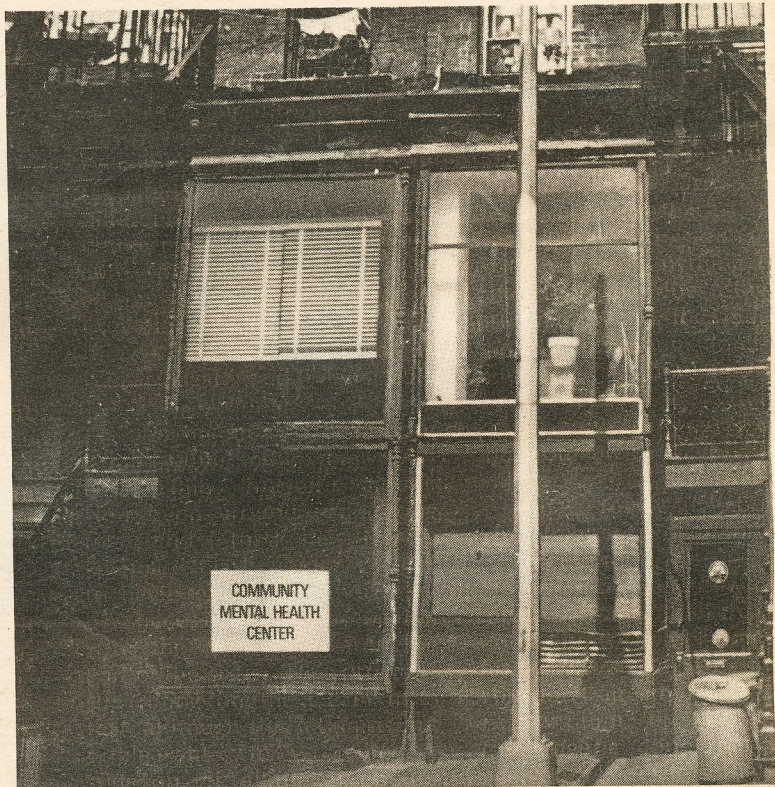
At a Kitsilano neighbourhood meeting May 16, the 'community' voted overwhelmingly to tell the B.C. government to "stop the machinery" on their 'community mental health clinics' until Kitsilano residents had gotten themselves organized.

I was down in the basement of the Kits United church, where the meeting took place, sticking my voting arm up at the appropriate times to say, along with the other people there, that the community wanted real power in this matter, and not token participation.

The plan for neighbourhood 'mental health' clinics is an effort to partially dismantle the 2,000 'patient' Riverview Mental Hospital. (The reason many of these terms are in quotes is because these are the categories of reality being debated that lie beneath the organizational shuffle on the surface. For example, if you don't accept the traditional idea of 'mental illness', your notion of a 'community mental health team' is going to be quite different from someone who accepts the old definition of 'crazy'.)

The NDP plan to cut admissions to giant snakepit mental hospitals is partially progressive and potentially reactionary. Already several hundred people in B.C. live in privately owned, publicly-funded 'mental patient boarding houses' which are a) dismal places to exist in (according to reliable reports), and b) profitable business ventures for the boarding house owners. The 'progressive' shrinkage of Riverview could well lead to the backward spread of these 'boarding houses'.

The Sun reporter was also at the Kits meeting. But you wouldn't know it by the story published in the May 17 Sun. Its Chamber of Commerce booster



the following items: 1) a detailed explanation of the complex political structure of the mental health bureaucracy in B.C., made by Barry Coull of the Mental Patients' Association (a self-organized group of patients operating a drop-in centre and residences in Kits) - knowledge any community needs in order to act; 2) the context of [the] motion by Joyce Marvin of Kits House to "freeze hiring": a move toward real control rather than 'advisory input'; 3) that the motion on hiring and a subsequent one requesting money to fund public participation was a method by which the community could test the sincerity of the government which now holds the \$1.8 million budget; 4) that the people present at the meeting - mainly neighbourhood activists (which is why I put 'community' in quotes) - were the ones insisting that the Community Board be actually representative

'blazing trail' will only lead down the garden path to 'little Riverviews' located in church basements (a woman, reporting negatively on the activities of the pilot West End Mental Health Team, Dr. [Name] Nelson, sounded the warning).

By way of comparison to the Sun optimism, a report on the same event published in MPA's **In a Nutshell** newsletter (May 21, written by MPA researcher Dick Betts) was headed: "Kits Meeting Calls Halt on Mental Health Team Hiring". This was also an optimistic story, but the optimism was that the 'community' might actually have hiring-firing power and control of the Kits clinic and that 'public participation' might turn out to be more than a p.r. cover as has happened in the past.

The two differing versions are not a case of 'the medium is the message'. That is, it isn't simply a matter of opinion as to what took place at a particular meeting. It's a question of objective significance (the 'truth')

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The **Sun** reporter was also at the Kits meeting. But you wouldn't know it by the story published in the May 17 **Sun**. Its Chamber of Commerce booster tone is headed "Mental Health Clinics Trailblazers." Ninety per cent of **The Sun** report (it opens: "Vancouver could be the trailblazer in making mental health care a community affair in Canada") is devoted to enthusiastic quotes from Ray Goodacre, acting executive director of Greater Vancouver Mental Health Project, and Dr. Hugh Parfitt, the man "slated to become the psychiatrist at the new Kitsilano clinic." (The real question: "slated" by whom? is tactfully ignored by the **Sun** journalist.)

The 'community' in whose interest the May 16 meeting was called, is relegated to one paragraph (the last one, naturally): "The meeting resolved to formally ask Goodacre to freeze the hiring of staff for the clinic until a citizens' advisory board is established, and in a position to provide the clinic with guidelines." There is no explanation of why the 'community' made this decision, leaving the reader in the shade.

The **Sun** story failed to report



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This summer in Vancouver there will be a great shortage of bed space for transients. This situation is well known by the people concerned with providing shelter for adventurers who are going to visit the city this summer. As of now we have 20 hosts ready to take people; we will need about 580 more hosts for the opening of the HOME Placement PROGRAM WHICH IS DUE TO HAPPEN ON THE FIRST OF June.

Therefore, the Home Placement Program is in the process of recruiting houses that would take young people for a stay of 1 to 4 days at \$2.50 per person per day. HOUSES ACCEPTING YOUNG PEOPLE WOULD BE REQUIRED TO SERVE BREAKFAST AND DINNER AND PROVIDE BEDSPACE. If you wish to be a host give us a call at 681-3494 between 12 noon and 6:00 p.m. daily or write or come to 1845 West Georgia Street.