

bill.wilkerson's
Line on Mental Health

“A Road With No Curbs”

Over the past four years or so, the Roundtable has talked a lot about the statistics of mental health and mental illness. This column will be more of a home for the stories of people living the drama behind the numbers.

I just completed two years on an Ontario Government task force on mental health reform.

Among other things, I learned about the unheralded and heroic role that families play in the care of those living with the most serious forms of mental illness.

Theirs is a vigilance which never lets up – yet, it goes largely unseen. They need our support, our gratitude, our tears and our tax dollars.

This column will be a modest voice for them.

One of the most vivid personalities I have met since the Roundtable started is Marten deVries, a physician and psychiatrist born in Amsterdam, raised in New York and now the head of a unique public mental health institute at the University of Maastricht.

He is a great man, blessed with a sense-of-humor and a remarkably creative approach to a topic often bound in the heavy leather jacket of conventional thinking and precedent.

Dr. deVries tells the story of a patient he's treating – a man who lives with schizophrenia. According to the mythology and stigma which engulf mental illness, he is trapped in torment forever.

Dr. deVries sees a different picture. This man, he says, is “crazy” only a couple of hours a week – usually late in the afternoon for some reason.

Otherwise, he is doing his daily chores, going to work when he can find a job, seeing movies, going to libraries and soccer matches.

The idea, as deVries tells it, is not to treat this man as if his life is not worth living, but to give him the care he needs to get through those couple of hours each week.

Recovery from mental illness is a journey not a destination. It is a unique thing. Which shouldn't surprise us. So are people. Mental illness needn't be a life sentence.

My father lived with serious and persistent mental illness when I was a kid. He died when I was 19.

More than once, he “went away” to the Ontario Hospital on Hamilton mountain – “Hamilton on the Hill,” we called it then – a forbidding, grim, punishing place – a symbol of ages past.

My mother got there by bus to visit him. But the bus didn't go to the top, it stopped part way up, its front wheels nearly rearing up like the horses in sight of Dracula's castle. The fear inside flowed outside like bleak and tinted light.

My mother ascended the mountain by foot on a twisting road with no curbs.

Inside, my father – a big and brave man, a baseball fan who took me to see Mickey Mantle twice – was always afraid and inconsolable. He often wept outright. Begged her to take him home.

She didn't have the power to do that. He was imprisoned – by stigma and by the harsh soul of bleak care.

Maybe this column can be a voice for him as well.

Better late than never.