Moving Toward Person-Centered and Recovery-Oriented Services and Systems

Peer Training and Empowerment at the Howie the Harp Advocacy Center: Keeping Pace with a Bigger, Stronger Peer Movement

By Jon Curtis, Communications Specialist, Community Access, Inc.

Without meaning to stretch the analogy too far, there was perhaps something rather apt—albeit unfortunate—about the 17th Annual Howie the Harp Advocacy Center (HTH) Graduation Ceremony being delayed three months because of Hurricane Sandy. It was originally scheduled for October 29, 2012, the day Sandy hit New York. As with countless other buildings across the East Coast, NYU’s Kimmel Center, the venue for the ceremony, ended the day without heat or power.

Apt, because HTH graduates (up to now there have been more than 800 in total) are more keenly aware than most that life seldom follows a linear path with clear signposts along the way. Circumstances often conspire to get in the way of where we aim to go, and detours, delays, and frustrations are not always possible to avoid. Yet apt, too, because setbacks need not be final; just as power is fully restored in the wake of a storm, experiences, both good and bad, are all learning opportunities that may shape a brighter future.

The HTH Center, located in Harlem and operated by Community Access, Inc., is an empowerment and job training center for peers, which offers participants six months of in-class training, connection to three-month internship programs at numerous health and human services organizations throughout New York City, and support services relating to job placement and retention. Its graduation ceremony honors the achievements of up to 60 participants per year: individuals who complete one of two annual training cycles, fully equipped for an ever-growing number of roles within the mental health workforce and beyond.

This year’s ceremony may have been later than planned but, in common with its 16 predecessors, was a joyful occasion nonetheless. Peers graduate from HTH to a soundtrack of generous and heartfelt applause. It’s a tremendous landmark on the road to recovery, made still more resonant by many and varied hardships leading to it. As Lynnae Brown, HTH’s Coordinator of Education and Training, explains, “we see huge transformations between day one of class and graduation. People who start out feeling a bit shaky, doubting their ability to be effective in the world, who go on to be connected, team players enthusiastic about what’s coming next.”

“There are so many ways to serve in the peer movement today,” Brown continues, “and that range of possibilities is growing all the time. That’s exciting—we get to see people’s stories go from tragic to triumphant.” Indeed, with an increasingly widespread appreciation of how valuable peers in the workforce can be, more and more employers are learning to regard a wider spectrum of experiences as potential assets. The majority of HTH graduates have, in various combinations, histories of homelessness, mental illness, substance abuse, and incarceration. Through access both to opportunity and new networks of support, however, powerful new modes of thinking are encouraged: recovery is not only possible, it is also an outstanding ‘qualification’ for helping others to recover too.

Taking full account of this potential is a task that reverberates throughout the entire mental health community. New initiatives such as Parachute NYC (described in more detail opposite) are not just seeing peers as valued added but as essential. That’s why—to meet this growing demand—HTH is expanding to become both a bigger, more wide-ranging program, and a model for other providers to replicate, in other parts of the US as well as internationally (Pameijer, a human services organization in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, started using the HTH model, under license from Community Access, in 2012).

Says Community Access Deputy CEO Alyssia Pascaris, “Over 17 years, we’ve seen from experience what works and what doesn’t. We know what we want to achieve and how to achieve it—and that’s why we made a concerted effort to standardize our curriculum, making it as current and as effective as possible.”

“We’re more than a training center,” Pascaris continues, “graduates don’t just walk away with facts and skills, but also grow as people.” As such, HTH increasingly combines bedrock principles—foremost, the importance of self-advocacy and maintaining wellness—with areas of specialization that more effectively accommodate different life goals and individual needs. Different tracks at HTH, for example, emphasize working with the LGBTQI community, veterans, and individuals with forensic histories.

Over the next couple of years, Recovery Connections, a major new HTH program, will take these approaches a step further still, initially serving residents of Manhattan and the Bronx, and then all five boroughs thereafter. Described by Pascaris as a “center without walls,” it will provide peer-driven services that help peers to make and keep social connections within their communities, and better access a wider range of mainstream resources—through mutual support, education and information sharing, reigniting interests and aspirations lost by peers during incarceration and engagement with the traditional mental health system.

As with the peer movement, generally, Recovery Connections promises to be an initiative that organically sustains its own continuing growth. Literally, through facilitating meetings, hosting events, and making referrals to vocational and educational programs—but also symbolically, by more firmly positioning peers within society as a whole.