

The Washington Times



Interview: Carla Rabinowitz, Chair of Mental Health Film Festival

by Richard Ivory

May 12, 2013

New York, New York, May 13, 2013 – On Sunday, May 5th, the NYC Mental Health Film Festival was held at St. Francis College, in Downtown Brooklyn. The Festival is an annual event co-sponsored by Community Access and

The New York Association of Psychiatric Rehabilitation Services (NYAPRS) two of Manhattan's leading voices for the mentally in the State.

While at the event, I caught up with Carla Rabinowitz, the point person who coordinated this year's event. I sat down with her to chat about the purpose of this year's film festival, the stigmatisation of the mentally ill, and how the community can help.

Richard Ivory: How do you think the mentally ill community is being portrayed during the entire debate about gun control?

Carla Rabinowitz: During the recent debate on forced mental health treatment and the New York State Safety Act, news stories have stirred up prejudice and stigma against mental health recipients. We are depicted as violent pariahs. This stigma from society and the media also stop New York State from integrating mental health recipients into society. Governor Cuomo proposed reinvestment, reducing underutilized and poor performing psychiatric hospital units and putting that money into cheaper, more effective community services....

Richard Ivory: Did your organization try to provide some balance to the debate?

Carla Rabinowitz: Many organizations tried to provide balance to the debate by meeting with elected officials to explain why community services are more effective, cheaper, and less traumatizing than institutions. Our CEO, Steve Coe, was on a radio show five days after the Sandy Hook shootings (WNYC, Brian Lehrer). He stressed that many people avoided treatment because of the trauma experienced in a typical psych ER and over use of medications. He highlighted the need for alternative approaches, such as our recently opened crisis respite center and peer-operated support line (see below).

Crisis respite care is a short, two-week stay in a house like environment with workers with lived mental health experience, peers. During crisis respite care, peers work to help those in crisis to create long term plans to deal with their stressors or triggers, to avoid hospitalization in the future. There is also a focus on better access to primary care for the long term.

Richard Ivory: Why is there a need for a Film Festival focusing on mental illness?

Carla Rabinowitz: There is a need for a Film Festival focusing on mental illness to share the countless positive stories about mental health recipients, mental health recipients as neighbors, family members and valuable employees. The Film Festival aims to portray to broader society mental health recipients in a way they usually don't view us. The film fest defeats stigma by bringing together for a day people with and without mental health concerns.

Richard Ivory: How many events have you had so far?

Carla Rabinowitz: This year is the 9th year of the Community Access/NYAPRS NYC Mental Health Film Festival.

Richard Ivory: What is your role here at the film festival?

Carla Rabinowitz: I am the chair of the film festival, I help organize volunteers from around the city for this event. I am a community organizer for Community Access. Community Access is a 39 year old nonprofit that empowers mental health recipients to lead healthy, independent lives. Community Access helps people move out of homelessness and institutions into

apartments of their own. Community Access allows me to devote countless man-hours to this event, everything from garnering press to outreach to obtaining funding and donations.

Richard Ivory: How do you think this year's film festival went?

Carla Rabinowitz: This year's film fest was excellent. We attracted over 250 people and had 30 plus wonderful volunteers. We started a survey this year to gather people's opinions. Two answers stood out. One person wrote what he/she took away from the day was "being so glad that successful people (famous) are coming forward to share their experiences. It gives everyone HOPE. Thanks" Another person expressed he/she "did not know there was so much film making by/for/about people with mental health issues impressive!" He/she stated he took away that "film is a catalyst for community building."

Richard Ivory: Did anything surprise you this year?

Carla Rabinowitz: One thing that surprised me was a comment by a volunteer. She now lives in another state but came into New York during the time of the film festival. She said she lives elsewhere but these volunteers are her family.

Richard Ivory: What was the theme this year and why?

Carla Rabinowitz: The theme this year was mental health recipients who excel. The reason is that when you read about mental health recipients or hear about us from other people, the thought you have is that we are violent, non-productive, kind of pariahs of society. Yet that is not true, we are teachers, social

workers, lawyers, even doctors. And we are good neighbors, loving family members, great friends, and valuable employees.

Richard Ivory: What were your favorite documentary choices?

Carla Rabinowitz: My two favorite documentary choices were the films Three Voices and Rethink BPD. Three Voices is a film that portrays the life of 3 young adults with a mental health condition who live in Canada. Rethink BPD was my absolute favorite in part because after 9 minutes you felt you really knew the film's subject, Amanda Wang. And she is even greater in person. People at the film fest described Amanda as amazingly articulate, and she was so patient she spoke to everyone who wanted to meet her. Rethink BPD followed Amanda, an amateur boxer, and her path to deal with her mental health concern, which she described as a Borderline Personality Disorder.

Richard Ivory: How can people get involved?

Carla Rabinowitz: People can get involved by calling me, Carla Rabinowitz at 212-780-1400 x7726 for monthly advocacy meetings or Community Access programs. Or they can contact me at crabinowitz@communityaccess.org

Richard Ivory: Do you have a referral for families suffering with mental illness?

Carla Rabinowitz: Community Access operates or provides services to over 20 apartment buildings for those with mental health concerns, both temporary and permanent. For mental health housing call 212-780-1400 x7706 or x7708.

Community Access hosts a free employment training program in the field of human services known as the Howie T Harp Peer Advocacy Center. This program consists of 6 months of classroom training and a 3 month externship with lifetime placement.

Community Access has two new programs. We have a warm line from 4 pm to Midnight which anyone can call. The warm line number is 646-741-HOPE. That is also the best place to find out information on our crisis respite center.

Community Access also operates a new Recovery Center that connects mental health recipients up to mainstream society. That number is 212-865-0775. Anyone who needs other resources can call me at 212-780-1400 x7726.

Richard Ivory: Thank you for allowing us to conduct this interview!

Carla Rabinowitz: No problem.