

Speech on Mental Health – (Excerpted) – So I Stopped Asking

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We have a café in the area of our outpatient program in Jamaica. With the exception of our manager, our recipients staff it - our mentally ill patients who are being re-trained in a vocational setting to once again become productive members of our society. What you may notice most is the line. It is usually out the door at lunchtime. It looks like a small diner – it literally blows you away. This is truly a picture worth a thousand words!

When I joined TSI, I was both fascinated and overjoyed that we, WE, had such a one-of-a-kind facility. It is so cutting edge that I had to share it. I immediately called friends who would later be introduced to our program. “I’m inviting you to lunch,” I said. “I’m working for a mental health facility right here in Queens. We have this café – the food is great, the place has the look and feel of a diner, and it is fully staffed by people who are suffering from mental illnesses.”

Sadly, I had no takers. I realized that the perceptions I had learned to overcome were still deeply imbedded in most. With innovative programs like the ones Transitional Services offers and the State of NY supports, we re-train our mentally ill citizens to once again become productive members of our society.

So, I stopped asking. I just started inviting them. I told them we would go to lunch first and then go visit a program. The place I wanted to take them was nearby. During lunch, they would tell me how great the food was, how good the service was, how attentive the staff was. Now that they were aware of its location, they would start inviting their friends to eat there. As it became more crowded, there was questions like: “How did you find this place?” and “Thanks for letting me know.” I informed them about the catering services available and how I had used it for several parties and events, and also about the breakfast service. Little did they know!

When we walked out the door, I finally told them that this was the program I wanted them to see. Usually they are stunned and speechless. Some need to walk back in. A few sit back down and stare for about fifteen minutes.

Their entire view and perception of mental health in today’s society has just gone out the window! The ugliness, the fears – they weren’t there. They feel

compelled to apologize but it is not necessary. I enjoy the conversion process too much. I just thank them.

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