

Peer Perspective: Dan O'Neil



I am now in my 33rd year of living with mental illness. I was diagnosed schizophrenic and hospitalized immediately in 1985. After a two week stay, I left there thinking that I wasn't sick and went on a job search. I held an opticians job thereafter for eighteen months; left for another which lasted nine months. The next three months, I began a downward spiral. I had another hospital stay in 1989, split between a private and a state hospital. This time I left thinking that I should deal with my illness, treat it, and have since been conscientious with outpatient monitoring of my condition.

Employment

Vocationally, I remained out of work until 1991. I thought by then, there was too big a gap in my resume to continue as an optician. I hooked up with Crossroads clubhouse in Hopedale, and they put me on a new employment track. I had a temporary employment (TE) position bagging groceries at a grocery store, and then another picking up clean trash in the distribution center of a former record store in Milford. After six months my TE was ending and I asked the center manager for a full time job. Initially he offered me the trash job, which I turned down because it would have taken away a TE from the clubhouse and was too demanding physically for me to maintain. Three days later, he offered me a full-time data entry job. I qualified for it because the clubhouse had sent me for computer training along the way. Three months into it, I got Employee of the Month. Three years into it I was fired for absenteeism. I didn't handle the grind of the job well or think to negotiate again for another in-house job.

The mid-90's were a time of vocational drifting. I spent much of my time in temporary jobs, and on Social Security Disability Insurance. I worked for eighteen months in a Department of Development Services (DDS) sponsored residence in Attleboro, serving three men in wheelchairs. In 1997, my former clubhouse director told me of an opening for what is now called a Peer Specialist job part time in Quincy. I applied and that leads us to today, nineteen years later. I've spent nineteen years working out of case management offices as a Peer Specialist in Quincy, Canton, Westborough and this January I retired from Worcester Recovery Center and Hospital. I have future employment plans to get volunteer and/or part-time outreach work.

Advice to other Peer Workers

If you aren't working in an inpatient setting then I would say that:

1. Sometimes networking isn't one thing to do; it's the only thing. The broader your network of sources of information and other workers can be the difference between having success in the short or midterm vs: no success at all.
2. Managers may have to look at what they term the "bigger picture." Peer line staff should only concern themselves with the benefit they want for the client, and then perhaps negotiate from there. Always promote the individual client's welfare, it's our function.
3. Unless the problem/difficulty you're working on is something you'd rather not let a non-peer in on, and that is very much less common than twenty years ago, don't discriminate about who you get aid from. Of course, some contacts in and out of the peer community carry too high a quid pro quo, and should be set aside; the other 80% should be fine.

Lifestyle and hobbies

I have lived with a younger sister in two locations over the last fifteen years, and have strong ties to a few of my other relatives. My rock and strength in my personal life for 25yrs has been my Christian faith and the people that connection has put in my path.

My hobbies vary with each decade of my life. Now, and for the last twenty years, I have been a classical music lover and have quite a classical CD collection. Before that I enjoyed country music; and further back: rock and blues. I was a cross-country skier in a big way in the 1980's, and a tennis player in the 1970's. Photography was big in my life from 30 up until 10 years ago; not so much lately.

Memorable moments

1. Getting praise from a national public figure on my skills as a social worker. I didn't think I was even in the ballpark that he would notice, but he did. I didn't respond correctly, so I lost the contact, but I remember he did call.
2. Being told after my first two years at DMH part-time, that I more than qualified for a full-time peer job with the agency. I thought I would get a polite turn-down.