

From Illness to Advocacy: Consumer Advocate Tells Her Story

by Jamie in Michigan

I am a Mental Health Consumer Advocate. I have not always been a Mental Health Consumer Advocate. When I started out, I was in Schizophrenic Anonymous. I started out going to a conference where I met people like myself with mental illnesses - with schizophrenia and schizo-affective disorder, and bipolar disorder. These people were like a family to me. As a matter of fact, it was better than the family because I have always heard the saying, "You can choose friends, but you can not choose your family!", and to this day, after 15-years of being involved with Schizophrenic Anonymous, knowing members of Schizophrenic Anonymous and having Schizophrenic Anonymous friends, I still keep in contact with people in California, New York, Lansing, Michigan - all over the United States.

I have made contacts through Schizophrenic Anonymous. I became the director of National Group Development for the National Schizophrenia Foundation for Schizophrenic Anonymous, and I also was the coordinator of Michigan Group Development. When I worked for National Schizophrenia Foundation, I was the first full-time employee for Schizophrenic Anonymous. This was a big accomplishment for me. I came from a small town in Michigan, where I am living now, which has only 1700 people in it. I do not have a college education. I have a high school education.

In the one year, during the time I was Director and Group Leader/Coordinator of the National Schizophrenia Foundation, I traveled all over the United States. I was like a jet setter until I got physically and mentally sick. I had to leave my job due to this. It was the worse thing I had to do. I left in a way that I probably shouldn't have, but it was God guiding me into a different direction. I always wanted to be an Advocate and a year later I made a call to a friend of mine that worked for Mental Health America and she gave me some advice, "Call around and volunteer."

I started volunteering for some agencies and my name started to get known in Michigan and nationally. In January of 2007, I was just put in a report from the Kaiser Foundation on Medicaid. It was a 52-page report, and I thought that was a pretty good accomplishment. I have been volunteering for Mental Health America for 15 years and I would like to be able to volunteer and work with Mental Health America for at least another 15 more years.

In 2005, the Michigan Department of Community Health gave me a distinguished award called the Cookie Gant Grant award. Cookie Gant was a Consumer Advocate who advocated for physically and mentally disabled people and people of diverse cultures and sexual orientation. I was very humbled when I received this award because Cookie was a very strong advocate in Michigan and nationally.

In 2001, when I moved down from Lansing, Michigan, I had been to a number of drop-in centers and club houses. I had seen that there had been Consumer Peers in a lot of these club houses and drop-in centers. I got on the Governors Mental Health Commission, and made a recommendation on my work group that there should be a Consumer Advocate and also a Consumer Peer in every Community Mental Health Center in every county. I also brought this up to my Assistant Director at my local Community Mental Health Center, and pushed it and pushed it. As of today, in 2007, there are three counties, my county included, that have 20 Consumer Peers in each county and that is mandated by the state. More counties are coming online every day.

I am proud to say, this was all from an idea that I had and put it into action.