

Well Attended Information Session Sends Strong Message That Mental Illness Resources And Strategies For Recovery Are Needed

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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PEMBROKE – Close to 200 people attended a free, public presentation on mental illness at Pembroke’s Clarion Hotel March 1st demonstrating a clear need for information, collaboration, and expanded resources in the region.

Hosted by Mental Health Services of Renfrew County, a program administered by the Pembroke Regional Hospital, the two-hour session featured keynote speaker Dr. Pat Deegan, along with several panelists, information displays from regional support agencies and an opportunity to ask questions.

Dr. Deegan, an Adjunct Professor at Dartmouth College’s Geisel School of Medicine is a recognized thought leader in the field of behavioural health recovery. In her one-hour presentation, Dr. Deegan shared a very detailed overview of her own personal journey of recovery after being diagnosed with schizophrenia in her teens.

At the time of her diagnosis, Dr. Deegan was a talented athlete with a bright promising future but she said that her treatment which involved high doses of medication and an avoidance of stress sent her into despair and withdrawal from her active lifestyle.

She outlined her frustrations in dealing with a care team who didn’t share her vision of an appropriate outcome. They felt treatment was successful in that it stopped the progression of her illness, but she felt it wasn’t a success if she wasn’t “living” or achieving the quality of life she wanted.

It was at that time in her life that Dr. Deegan said she began to look to spirituality in terms of finding meaning and purpose in her life. “Boredom and having no reason to get out of bed is stressful and recovery meant finding my reason to get out of bed in the morning,” Dr. Deegan said.

Crediting her grandmother with offering her a chance to step back into the world each day with the invitation to grocery shop, Dr. Deegan said taking her up on that offer one day was the first step towards self-care and not long after she realized her calling was to become a doctor and change the mental health system for the better.

“All of us in recovery can make a discovery of our purpose and it’s critical that when helping those with mental illness, that we don’t ever give up on anybody.”

Dr. Deegan explained that care givers and health care providers can help by not defining a person by their illness and by helping individuals find the meaning and purpose in their life.

Panelists Paul McIntyre, August Mcrea and Sabine Mersmann each brought their own perspective to the table regarding mental health illness and recovery.

Mr. McIntyre is President of the Mental Illness Caregiver Association of Canada (MICA), a peer lead organization supporting families with vocation, education, housing and other aspects of future planning. From a father's perspective, he said that helping a loved one with mental illness is a lifelong journey, and one in which people are not alone. "As a parent your first response it to try and fix them which then leads to a sense of hopelessness when you realize you can't," he said, adding that being able to network with other families while sharing experience and knowledge can be a great thing.

Ms. Mcrea who is a Peer Support Worker for Mental Health Services of Renfrew County shared her personal journey and lived experience with trauma, mental illness and poverty which she now uses to challenge stigma and help others. Both an advocate and an activist, she uses skills she has learned to now make "amazing authentic connections with others" and shares with them the importance of self-care.

And Ms. Mersmann, Vice-President of Patient Services for Seniors and Community Care at Pembroke Regional Hospital which includes oversight of the Mental Health Services program spoke about the importance of health care providers working together to improve the system.

"The Ministry of Health and Long Term Care is investing money in mental health and mental health and addiction is a priority for the Champlain Local health Integration Network. The challenge is that we need to move more towards working as a system, not silos and a meeting like tonight is a good first step."

Ms. Mersmann spoke about a number of current and future local initiatives, including planned health hubs for youth and young adults and a partnership between Mental Health Services of Renfrew County and Carefor to create more supportive housing.

Ms. Mersmann said that, while a lot of mental health treatment still tends to be based on traditional care models, the integration of peer support workers are an important and positive steps towards developing services that support a recovery based model of self care and empowerment. "A successful evening like this sends a powerful message that this is an important area of care and that we all need to work together to further improve the system," Ms. Mersmann said.

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