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Making a push for better care: Protesters march to bring attention to mental health services

BY VICTORIA BEKIEMPIS

 EMAIL THIS WRITER

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NORTHAMPTON - Pushing a bed a mile and three-quarters through the city Sunday afternoon, 15 members of the Northampton-based Freedom Center aimed to bring attention to forced drugging and other perceived injustices of the psychiatric system.

Marchers, many of whom do not consider themselves mentally ill but instead maintain that they are victims of the mental health system, brandished signs with slogans like "Hugs Not Drugs" and "Big Pharma: How much \$ would you lose if you dared to tell the truth" as they made their way downtown from Cooley Dickinson Hospital.

Their destination was The First Churches, where the self-described victims of the mental health system spoke on the church steps to a crowd of protesters and curious onlookers, as well as sidewalk sale shoppers who paused to listen.

One organizer, Catherine Simon of Northampton, said she had been institutionalized when she was 15 and 16 because of so-called manic behavior. To balance the grueling workload of high school with a social life, she explained, she went without sleep and hence fit the pathology for a manic-depressive - although she claims not to have had the condition. Social alienation at her Orthodox Jewish high school was also key to misdiagnosis, Simon said.

"I was this bisexual, radical, feminist chick and really fascinated with the Talmud, (but) I was conflicted because I didn't belong there."

For Simon, the ordeal of institutionalization was further worsened by the long-term side-effects of psychiatric drugs.

"All the institutionalization was traumatic," she said, but "it was being so blunted by the drugs for years after that" that she considers to be worse.

Obstacles

The marchers did hit a few snags along the way. The Freedom Center, a nonprofit advocacy group for psychiatric survivors, had a parade permit to march on the sidewalk but not on the road, and were asked by police on several occasions to move out of the road because police said they were blocking traffic.

One protester, who was working a waist-mounted snare drum as she walked, complained that the request was a violation of civil liberties, saying that if she was alone she would be allowed to walk in the road.

"Now if it was just me, I would have my own citizen's rights, wouldn't I?" she



JERREY ROBERTS

A group of people, some dressed in medical attire, support Mad Pride Month by pushing a bed down Elm Street Sunday afternoon. Supporters say the bed push symbolizes an escape from psychiatry and was held to raise awareness about the overuse of forced treatments in mental health and the need for safe choices in mental health services.

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said.

Honks of support and thumbs-ups greeted marchers during the walk down Elm Street, but some recipients of the center's leaflets tried to return them.

One man, who tried to give a leaflet back so as not to waste paper but was rebuffed by a marcher who said her hands were full, said he wasn't sure whether the Freedom Center's method was effective.

"There's a lot better things to complain about than psychiatric patients holding up Route 9 with a bed," said Edward Balon of Enfield Conn. "What's it going to accomplish?"

The hospital bed gradually broke en route to the churches, first losing one wheel then others, so that a metal leg at times screeched against the sidewalk until it was hoisted up by marchers.

When the group finally arrived at the church, a moment of silence was held for victims of the mental health system.

One self-described victim, Linda Famosi, said the staff at Cooley Dickinson hospital misinterpreted her concern over her high blood pressure and potential stroke as borderline personality disorder. Famosi said she has since been diagnosed with an arterial problem.

On another occasion, Famosi said, a male staff member walked into her hospital room while she was changing clothes and declined to leave.

"There is a lot of abuse behind closed doors," she said.

A man who went by the name of Boxcar also spoke, but not exactly on the subject of abuses in the mental health system. Boxcar did not attend the push and was not a member of the Freedom Center, but was around the church when the speeches began and decided to address the audience.

"This is my belief," he began. "9/11 would never have happened if it wasn't for George Bush Jr. and his greed."

After fishing in his pockets for a harmonica and playing a rendition of "Amazing Grace," an organizer asked Boxcar to leave the stage so someone else could speak.

Edward Moczydlowski of Northampton, who spoke before Boxcar, said psychiatric medication "is a Band-Aid - it helps, but it doesn't cure," and said Cooley Dickinson had him arrested for trespassing when he sought treatment for suicidal thoughts. Moczydlowski was then admitted to Baystate Medical Center several days later. According to organizer Chaya Grossberg, this type of abuse is just one of the many that go on in psychiatry.

The Northampton resident explained, however, that most people remain ignorant of the situation.

"The pharmaceutical industry advertises a lot," she said. "We just want to give people another perspective."

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