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The Highlight of My Week

Most of us have probably attended just about every type of graduation there is...first grade, high school, college, and so on. During May as well as into June, TV and print media will show headlines of grads of one school or another as well as all sorts of pictures reflecting the celebrations.

The "graduation" I had the honor of attending this past Friday will not be in the news like others and was not called a graduation. It was the Fourth Annual Banquet of the Second Wind Clubhouse of North Central Counseling Services, a service component of Community Health Resources, Inc., a private non-profit agency funded by DMHAS. An annual tradition at the event is recognition of clubhouse members for their various accomplishments, making it feel much like a graduation.

Though my stay had to be brief, it was the highlight of my week. After hours of going over budget numbers earlier in the day, it was an uplifting reminder that, behind all of those budget figures, there are real people—people who have made remarkable accomplishments.

So what's the point? Graduations do signal satisfactory completion of academic requirements and a degree one may use to begin a work career. But it is more than that. It is also about the "student" progressing to higher levels of skill, of being more comfortable and capable in their social and personal life. This learning is often more important and sustaining than the school achievement itself.

The "students" or members of the Second Wind Clubhouse are persons with mental illness of one form or another, sometimes also with a substance use disorder. The Clubhouse has a great Program Director and the service is basically peer-run. A host of activities and groups are available for the members, tools they can use to feel more comfortable, satisfied and confident in their life – in spite of their serious illness. Though some do pursue further study at neighboring community or other academic institutions, many already have a decent education.

Kevin was the emcee, well organized –humorous when he did misplace a paper, upbeat and congratulatory for the audience of 100-125 people. He would fit the bill for any graduation emcee.

What was this "graduation" like? Each of the 16 persons who spoke described a Clubhouse activity that they chose to participate in as part of their journey to a better life for themselves, in spite of their mental illness. Indicative of "Person Centered Planning," the person with the illness selects the "tools" that they choose to use and believe will work best for them. Medications and therapy are obviously part of the approach to mental illness...not the whole answer. These 16 individuals want more than that. They want a life in the fullest sense of the word as with anyone with a serious illness.

What Clubhouse activity worked for them? Gary talked about a group he regularly attended that focused on hope, Lettie one that was anchored to spirituality. Emcee Kevin and Linda described the Wellness Recovery Action Plans each had created and that worked for them. James focused on the weekly Addiction groups as one of his tools while Cathy eloquently spoke of her journey from full time employment to being homeless and how Schizophrenia Anonymous groups have brought her "to life" again. Gary emphasized the role of exercise in his life and Cathy D. talked of the arts and crafts groups as creative and satisfying interventions for her.

Employment...an element in one's life that many take for granted was the aspect highlighted by the balance of the 16 speakers. Julie noted how, when diagnosed with a mental illness, she thought her life was over; now she is one of the leaders of the Warmline service helping others. Michael D. touted the "World of Work" support groups as critical to his recovery and how much he enjoys his employment at the clubhouse canteen.

Will all of the new graduates in the news have successful, happy and satisfying lives forever more? We hope so but we know better. The work of any 2009 graduate is far from over. Some will have more than their fair share of disappointments and stresses. Some will have the "smarts" but will fail to apply the social and personal life skill tools they learned, will falter and then get back up...stronger than ever in one of several new beginnings in their lives. Some will be like the 16 Clubhouse members who experienced the devastation of mental illness, had the courage to test themselves and to choose another new beginning. It is called the journey of recovery.

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