

“YOUNG ADULTS IN THE CLUBHOUSE”
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We are just in the process of forming a program for Young Adults at Genesis. In preparing for this presentation I spoke to our members in the 18 – 25 age group to see what was going on in their lives and what the involvement in the clubhouse was like at the present time. I found out a lot of things – a lot of issues that seemed to be consistent in this age group. Some of the issues are ones that all young adults are dealing with – identity, purpose, rebelling against authority and forming their own authority. All of these issues intimately related to also having a mental illness. I will also briefly refer to my own experience in the last ten years since I was first hospitalized with depression at age 21. It became clear to me that this is an alienated group at Genesis and I hope that we have started to name some of the reasons why.

Typical of a lot of people’s experience, I was first diagnosed my last year of college. I now know that I had been suffering from clinical depression throughout my childhood and adolescence but had managed to get through high school and most of college. I was first hospitalized when PTSD symptoms along with the depression took over and I could no longer even get out of bed, never mind fill the demands of art school and working part-time. I was both relieved that there was a name for my suffering and terrified that I would not live through it. This fear stayed with me. Most of the decade to follow was spent depressed and alternately hospitalized and living in a residence at McLean Hospital (and when my private insurance ran out, various other hospitals). I watched my friends graduate, form careers, move around the country and get married. I gave up my dream of becoming a painter living in Boston pursuing a creative life. I became isolated and rejected friends who were not in the mental health community. I gave up and sleep-walked through day programs. I constantly feared losing my housing. I don’t know if I can get across the constant terror that I lived in. I do not feel that way now, and my involvement in clubhouse is a large part of the reason why. At this point, I am on medication that works, do work that I love, have relationships where I am respected and cared about, live in my own apartment through Genesis Housing and most importantly, feel good.

This ties into the issues our younger members are dealing with – becoming ensconced in the mental health system at a young age involves helplessness, hopelessness, loss of the natural process of growing and maturing into an adult along with issues of safe and affordable housing, academic education, education about mental illness, treatment options and combating stigma. People need to learn to become their own advocate. It can be hard and takes practice but is a joy to be able to do. Clubhouse is a perfect place to practice. The folks I talked to seemed to be existing in a kind of negative limbo, articulating their feelings through non-action and often substance abuse.

When I asked people what they would like to happen, answers often –actually almost always revolved around social needs. So it seems that special young adult events – outings, coffeehouses, art and creative writing projects and dances where they could meet and join together would be important. People clearly got excited talking about these things.

Work was a different story. When I suggested checking out some of the units, people said that they did not want to work for no money and pretty clearly viewed taking part in the work ordered day as a day filled with staff telling them what to do. They had already had enough of this through their first hospitalizations, day programs, group homes and parents. Clearly the partnership model is not getting across. I could understand where they were coming from, as it took me about a year to understand the partnership model and had shared some of the feelings that were being expressed. As I tried to explain that I took part in the Training Unit for a variety of reasons, one of them being because it is fun, I really felt that I was lecturing. The way that I started to understand the opportunities in clubhouse was through my experience engaging in the work and relationships in the unit. Along with the Training Unit work I eventually started branching out to other units. With my experience with Art, I was asked to participate in a recently formed Art Committee. The more I participate, the more interesting it gets. For a long time I understood the partnership model in mostly an intellectual sense but didn't really buy it. When I felt it inside, my self-consciousness suddenly fell away – I was a regular person doing regular work. Not more than – not less than – just normal. So the partnership model is not getting across to our young adult members. How do we make unit work appealing, get across the pleasure and satisfaction of work ethic and that this all relates to building a life and career and feeling normal.

Another issue is that the average age at Genesis is forty. The new generation coming into clubhouse is a very different one – hospitalizations are shorter now, medications are better, and there is a lot more awareness of mental illness all around. How do we tailor clubhouse to suit these changes and keep ourselves pertinent to the current culture? This is also important to keep our funding sources and to obtaining new ones.

Genesis is thinking of reshaping orientation for young adults in several ways. Have new young adult members hook up with young adult member tour guides to show them around the clubhouse. We need to keep people interested in the first two to four weeks, which is when most people drop out. We are thinking of having young adult coffee houses once a week in the evening. It needs to be on a schedule for the members' preference, not the staffs'. Substance abuse education and awareness is crucial. People are using regardless of living in supported housing. Education opportunities can be made available. With these in place, we can start to know our youngest members better.