

“Once you become a member, you’re always a member with a sense of belonging.

We call ourselves family.”

Mattie King, of Staten Island, New York, is talking about “her” Clubhouse—SkyLight Center, a member of the International Center for Clubhouse Development (ICCD)—**and she can’t say enough good things about it.**

Join the **club**

The hottest trend in recovery

By Stephanie Stephens

For King, 55, who was diagnosed with schizoaffective disorder in 2001 (and who also is a regular panelist for Christina Bruni’s Recovering Together column in *Schizophrenia Digest*), the “nudge” provided by SkyLight Center was just the ticket for her recovery: a springboard to greater responsibility and a more meaningful life.

And she is not alone. There are hundreds of formally established psychosocial clubhouses around the world, many sanctioned by the ICCD and others that function independently and are driven more by the unique needs of their local community. All share an emphasis on peer support, with varying degrees of professional involvement.

So if you’re looking for a place to belong and also thrive, why not reach out to a Clubhouse near you? Membership is open to anyone who has a history of mental illness, and many proponents believe this is “it”—the hottest trend and the future of treating mental illness.

Empowerment through involvement

“When I was diagnosed, I was devastated,” says King. “I felt like I didn’t belong anywhere anymore, didn’t fit into mainstream society anymore, and couldn’t work in corporate America.”

King says she felt her fear, moved through it and then past it, and began exploring each of the work units set up at her Clubhouse. The work units are designed to provide members with a sense of responsibility while providing skills training in various areas.

“Getting engaged in meaningful work helps self-esteem go through the roof,” she says excitedly. “It broadens your horizon. It’s very empowering.”

And aside from the work units, King notes that her Clubhouse offers wellness programs, a dental van, an exercise program, and even a thrift shop—amenities that make the place feel like “home.”

King’s first Clubhouse job was as a receptionist; then she moved into collecting attendance data (critical for

funding) and helping produce the monthly newsletter. It was all voluntary, “but you get so much more than money can give you,” she says. “It’s about the inner person: feeling self-worth soar and being useful.”

So inspired was she that she’s now on SkyLight Center’s board of directors and was recently named acting division director at the Baltic Street Mental Health Board.

Thousands of miles away, Laura Miyashiro, 55, of Kauai, Hawaii, shares King’s enthusiasm. She, too, has had a positive experience with her Clubhouse, called Friendship House.

“I know there are some folks who feel like because they have a mental illness, the world owes them something,” Miyashiro says. “I don’t like having a mental illness any more than anyone else does, and I fought and denied it for a long time. However, I think I have the right attitude in thinking it is me who owes the world a living, not the other way around. I have something to offer, and now I feel alive again.”

Miyashiro has been attending Friendship House for 10 years and transitioned into full-time employment in 1999; she now works full time at a local dry cleaning business and thanks her Clubhouse for “their support, [which] included job preparation, job training, helping me with reporting my benefits to the government, and giving me rides to work when our bus system is closed on holidays.”

Jamal Ali, formerly of Trinidad, West Indies, and now a resident of Calgary, Alberta, is an expressive writer, researcher, and mental health advocate who was diagnosed with schizophrenia at 25. He has been active in his local Clubhouse, Potential Place, since 2002.

“It has transformed my life for the better ... [and] continues to do me wonders,” he says. “Every day at this Clubhouse is a vibrant day for me.”

Ali volunteers at the Clubhouse and also contributes to its newsletter.

He says it has “given me courage to become a bridge to other organizations.” He works part time for the Schizophrenia Society of Alberta–Calgary chapter, where he talks openly with other family members about his experience with the disorder, and he’s spoken to psychology classes “to help erode the stigma and educate young minds.”

At 51, Ali says he is taking small but measurable steps “managing my illness” and getting the necessary structure he needs in his life through his Clubhouse involvement.

Clubhouse with a capital “C”

So how did these nonmedical, community-based Clubhouses (note that official capital letter “C”, denoting ICCD affiliation)—or psychiatric rehabilitation programs—come to be, and how does ICCD assure they’ll continue their good works?

“Clubhouses are founded on the realization that recovery from serious mental illness must involve the whole person in a vital and culturally sensitive community,” ICCD’s mission statement reads. “A Clubhouse community offers respect, hope, mutuality, and unlimited opportunity to access the same worlds of friendship, housing, education, and employment as the rest of society.”

ICCD’s mandate is to promote the development and strengthening of Clubhouses; oversee the creation and evolution of standards; facilitate and assure the quality of training, consultation, certification, research, and advocacy; and provide effective communication and dissemination of information.

The very first Clubhouse, Fountain House, was opened in New York City in 1948 by a group called We Are Not Alone, or WANA. It was an “intentional” community—a residential community for men and women who had histories of psychiatric illness. ICCD’s Web site (www.iccd.org) describes this groundbreaking institution as “unique in the world of mental health in many important ways.”

Unlike other programs for people with mental illness, Fountain House was founded on the premise that its members could work productively and have socially satisfying lives. Fountain House was also the first to create a Clubhouse in which members and staff work together side by side, as colleagues, to ensure the smooth operation of the Clubhouse.

Members and staff as partners in a symbiotic relationship? How could such a union even be suggested? Bravely, and with conviction, that’s how.

According to ICCD’s Web site, “for nearly 30 years, Fountain House



Jamal Ali and friends at Potential Place, Calgary, Alberta.



Staff member Ruth Parson works with Frank Mozie in the horticulture unit at Fountain House, New York City.

was alone in this way of working. It was considered a naive, if not radical notion that people with mental illness could benefit by a program based on rehabilitation, community, and mutually reciprocal relationships with staff.”

Coworkers, neighbors, friends

Clubhouse members worldwide applaud the Fountain House model, which alone has served more than 16,000 people since its inception. Its basis for programs and partnerships originates in work units that bring members and staff together to develop and operate a particular activity. Members facilitate intake and orientation of new members, housing placements, hiring of new staff, building maintenance, policy setting, advocacy initiatives, meal preparation, and service and program development.

The influence of Fountain House’s wide-ranging curriculum has made it possible for members there

and at other Clubhouses that followed suit to be respected as coworkers, neighbors, and friends—as they should be.

The concept has widespread appeal. Jack Yatsko, ICCD director of training, reports that some 20 to 25 Clubhouses open annually, and all adhere to a set of internationally reviewed and accepted Clubhouse standards. More than 400 Clubhouses are now established in 29 countries, with 225 functioning in North America alone. Approximately 150 have gone through a rigorous accreditation process to become ICCD certified. Yatsko estimates he receives approximately 50 emails a week inquiring about how to start a new Clubhouse; he expects the first Clubhouse in Mainland China to open this year.

To get a sense of the value of Clubhouses, he says, just take a tour. The food service work unit, for example, is only one necessary function and involves many categories: shopping, budgeting, menu planning, meal preparation, and clean-up.

“When members volunteer for a job, it fosters a degree of respect and expectation,” Yatsko says. “Members

and staff rely upon each other throughout the day in an atmosphere of collegial mutuality in carrying out the important work of the Clubhouse.”

The paid staff’s role, he adds, is to “reach out and engage members in all aspects of Clubhouse operations. Members have strong leadership roles in decision-making aspects of the operation that constitute a ‘work-ordered day.’”

What you *won’t* find at a Clubhouse are contracts or rules to enforce member participation; medication clinics; day treatment or therapy programs; or work for outside individuals or agencies. A Clubhouse enables its members to return to paid work through transitional employment, supported employment, and independent employment, but it does not provide employment per se to members through in-house businesses, segregated Clubhouse enterprises, or sheltered workshops. All of these work opportunities are integrated into the community as Clubhouse members work in real jobs, for real wages.

But personal needs aren’t ignored; members do receive help in securing housing, advancing their education, and obtaining good psychiatric and medical care.

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*The professionals talk and theorize about mental health issues. **We live them.***

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Fraser Thompson and Wayne Powell at Our Place, Midland, Ontario.

“ It has transformed my life for the better ... [and] continues to do me wonders. Every day at this Clubhouse is a vibrant day for me. ”

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More than mingling

Brad Turner, 44, of Midland, Ontario, was diagnosed with schizophrenia in 1985 and is now a part-time paid peer support worker at Our Place in his hometown, north of Toronto. Although Our Place is not accredited by or affiliated with the ICCD, it does incorporate valuable peer and professional support—and it has been so successful that a move to expanded headquarters is planned for the near future.

“It’s not just a place to come and drink coffee,” Turner says. “It’s a relaxed, comfortable setting where people can come together and talk and, without even knowing it, develop social and communication skills—and I’m sorry, but without social and communication skills, you can’t be integrated back into society, and you certainly can’t get or hold down a job.”

The role that interaction plays can’t be discounted, he adds. “I have come a long way with the help of mental health professionals, but I have come even farther due to the sharing of experience and support of my peers. This is where that sharing and support occurs, among all of our peers. The professionals talk and theorize about mental health issues. We live them.”

At Our Place, peer support workers like Turner attend training seminars. “We do have professionals supervising the clubhouse,” he explains, “[but] the peer support workers run it.” Recreational therapists from the Mental Health Centre Pentanguishene (MHCP) oversee programs, and many members access the care of a psychiatrist or social worker and a career counselor.

Our Place wasn’t modeled after any other particular clubhouse, but Grace Parker, manager of rehabilitation services for MHCP, doesn’t think Our Place “needs to be implemented exactly the same way as every other club in the world.” It’s rural, for example, and she’s happy—as are members—with what she calls the “mutant” concept: “a club that doesn’t fit the same kind of formal, credentialed model.

“We prefer to tailor our club to fit the community, and we’re fortunate in this area to have a pretty good relationship between consumers and providers,” Parker says. “It’s our own entity that can grow in a way we want and need it to grow.”

Sharing in recovery

Jordan Stone, 43, a filmmaker diagnosed with schizophrenia eight years

ago, believes individuals with different diagnoses simply cannot reap the same benefits in a group scenario as they can with those who share the same problem. Think Alcoholics Anonymous, he says.

As founder of The Secret Handshake, an sz peer-support network in Toronto, Stone says one size doesn’t fit all. People who share patterns, triggers, and symptomatology, he says, can “help each other and ... build up trust. It’s easier with someone who’s been through the experience than with a professional.”

The Secret Handshake is not an ICCD Clubhouse; rather, it is its own innovative recovery model. More than a year in existence, this club’s unique program “was created to complement, not replace, traditional mental health practice,” Stone says. “Once symptoms are under control with medication, healing must be holistic, incorporating all areas of one’s life, including the spiritual, emotional, and social challenges of living with the reality of schizophrenia.”

Stone describes the care of members by members at the clubhouse as “a full-time job.” He ensures that his colleagues—many of whom are very successful in their respective careers—follow “top minds” in schizophrenia

research so they can stay current and share news on medication and other pertinent scientific developments.

Due to a lack of funding, The Secret Handshake doesn't have its own meeting place. The clubhouse was recently incorporated as a non-profit and has applied for charity status, which may open some doors—literally: Stone's goal is to raise enough private money to purchase a house with sufficient meeting and office space to accommodate the clubhouse's 60-odd current members plus numerous others on a waiting list.

For now, members gather in a local coffeehouse once a week to socialize; discuss and support each other's experiences with symptoms, medications, and other issues; and exchange information. Stone says their club has found that this kind of enhanced interpersonal setting can lead to improved medication compliance and, consequently, decreased hospital admissions.

"Some people have gone from being totally isolated for years to being fully functional," he says, citing an example of one member who was reclusive, isolated, and catatonic due to overmedication when he first began attending meetings about a year and a half ago. The member's sister had heard about The Secret Handshake and contacted Stone to ask him to reach out to her brother. He did—and he says the member hasn't missed a meeting since. In fact, Stone adds, the member has undergone a complete turnaround: thanks to support from his fellow clubhouse members, he was able to get his medication adjusted, go back to school, and even rediscover what Stone describes as his "hilarious" sense of humor. He is "like a new person; no one is looking at him like a label."

Secret Handshake members "have all become friends," says Stone. "If somebody doesn't come to a meeting, there will be five people at their door."

The need to belong

Wayne E. Baker, a professor at the University of Michigan's Ross School of Business, once wrote: "The need to belong is a potent human force that finds expression in personal relationships, work relationships, community involvement, participation in voluntary associations, national pride, patriotism, tribal loyalties, and religious allegiances. The need to belong is hard-wired ... Belonging has measurable positive effects on subjective well-being, mental and physical health, and the body's biochemistry." Simply put, to belong—to be a member of the club—makes us feel good.

Although Baker is a business expert, his observations are just as relevant to this business we call life. **SZ**

Stephanie Stephens is a freelance print and broadcast journalist based in Laguna Niguel, California, and Auckland, New Zealand.



From Left: Bill Bissett, Anne Abraham, Jordan Stone, and Conor Quinn of The Secret Handshake, Toronto, Ontario.

clubhouses

on the Web

- **Fountain House**
www.fountainhouse.org
- **International Center for Clubhouse Development**
www.iccd.org
- **Our Place**
www.mhcva.on.ca/m1mhcp.htm
- **Potential Place**
www.potentialplace.org
- **SkyLight Center**
www.SkyLightCenter.org
- **The Secret Handshake**
thesecrethandshake@hotmail.com