



Fitzroy Frederick's (above) story goes back to the streets, while Frances Olivero's (right) goes to state legislation



Essential Esteem

The compelling stories of people recovering from mental illness

A job. A home. Friends to share with, and people to care about you. They're essentials of life that most people take for granted, and yet they're things that many people living with mental illness can't count on.

In New York City, there's an uncommonly successful organization that seeks to provide these essentials. In giving people not just shelter, but responsibility and support, it's been instrumental in helping hundreds of people with mental illness move into fulfilling, healthy lives.

The place is called Fountain House, and it's the subject of *West 47th Street*, a compelling cinema verité documentary showing in Victoria this week, as part of Movie Monday's annual Mental Illness Awareness Week. A sold-out success at last year's Vancouver Film Festival, it offers an unprecedented glimpse into the lives of four people living at Fountain House.

Instead of making use of intrusive narrators, or providing (possibly biased) interpretations of the action, the filmmakers—acclaimed directors Bill Lichtenstein and June Peoples—simply let the characters' lives unfold, through telling moments culled from 350 hours of footage taken over three years.

In this way, they introduce us to four compelling individuals, whose stories are each worthy of an entire film. Fitzroy Frederick, for example, moves off the streets and into Fountain House equipped with his anti-psychotic medications and huge bottles of a questionable Jamaican health tonic that he swears is what keeps him free of his schizophrenia. His reluctance to follow the Fountain House rules causes conflict, however, and we watch as staff workers and fellow resi-

dents negotiate their difficulties with him.

One of those feeling that conflict is Zeinab Wali, the only woman whose story is documented here. She, too, came to Fountain House from the streets, where she'd been ever since she began having schizophrenic episodes and her abusive husband took her kids back to Egypt. She finds new esteem in cooking for Fountain House residents, and manages to stand up for herself in a fresh way.

Another resident, Frances Olivero, takes a stand for others. Despite being diagnosed with terminal cancer, he becomes an advocate for people with mental illness and successfully lobbies the New York state government to pass a law in their favour.

The virtually unlimited access the filmmakers had to the lives of their subjects is particularly striking. To achieve this, they began their time at Fountain House with three months of camera-free interaction, getting to know all 400 active members. The final result is that the filmmakers have opened a vital window into a world many viewers, safe with their homes and jobs and friends, rarely get to see.

—Alisa Gordaneer

West 47th Street
 October 5, 7 pm & October 7, 6:30 pm.
 Eric Martin Pavilion Theatre
 By donation. 595-3542.