

MENTAL HEALTH



Survival in Movies

by Mathieu Powell

Every Monday night a movie plays on a 12-foot screen in a very comfortable theatre down at the Eric Martin Pavilion. And the price of admission is by donation. Attendees won't have to buy anything but pop and popcorn for a ridiculously low price.

Movie Monday (MM) was started by Bruce Saunders in 1993 and was "all about good film and critical film appreciation." He soon realized he had also made entertainment affordable to people in the community isolated by mental illness or poverty. Over time, MM became an effective outreach for mental health.

Today, the scope of the Movie Monday project is to provide, as well as entertainment, quality, thought-provoking material on topics around mental health and mental illness.

"These are movies, not meetings," says Bruce Saunders, the man behind MM. "Many will turn out to a movie around mental health, where few will turn out to a meeting. More people are going to movies than anywhere else. They have become part of our common vocabulary and frame of reference."

Saunders often hosts a discussion around the movie's message afterwards. Those who stay on for a while will come away with a richer understanding of the affects of mental illnesses. He invites audience participation from people who have experiences with mental illness and also from those who were drawn to the theatre for entertainment. He often has a panel of guests to help him foster a lively exchange of ideas and opinions.

"MM's schedule has always included a variety of popular films that explore mental health, such as 'One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest,' 'Shine,' or 'Girl Interrupted,' even 'What About Bob?'" says Saunders. "There are so many popular features which make powerful learning opportunities when presented with discussion opportunities and special guests."

Because film is such a powerful way to convey ideas, MM has recently been recognized as a "Best Practice" by BC's Mental Health Association.

Psychiatrist Harry Karlinsky of the Psychiatry Department of Continuing Education at the University of BC picked up on what Saunders was doing and is now using film for

clinical practice and education.

While MM's format has remained true to its initial cause, that of fostering a more open understanding community around mental health and illness, it has also expanded to challenging films about our own community and local issues.

Recently, two young men were instrumental in making a local film about dirt bike antics. MM decided to encourage their efforts and the film received a favorable reception at a recent screening. This kind of support for local talent, providing opportunities to screen quality films, has earned MM the attention of Canada Counsel and the commendation of film community.

Saunders traveled a long road to come to the success he enjoys today. He was once a patient at Eric Martin himself. He understands the power of depression.

Saunders's sister had made several poor choices for herself, he says. She was an intelligent woman, yet was in a bottom rung job. She married the wrong guy and experienced mood swings and depression. She committed suicide 28 years ago when Saunders was 26.

Her death had a big impact on Saunders, but he eventually put it behind him, never suspecting he was also vulnerable to manic depression.

"I went on for 15 years, not knowing I had a problem," says Saunders.

His awareness of his manic depression grew out of testing he underwent for a memory deficit. Doctors found he had a physical lesion in his brain that affected his memory. It was difficult news for Saunders and he struggled with depression. Saunders uses wet concrete as a metaphor to describe his condition.

"For me it's like running a finger through too-wet concrete and the concrete closes in again right away. I took one year of Fine Arts at UVic but my memory deficit and lack of direction and the suicide death of a close friend, another first year student, set me off in a different direction."

Saunders made two suicide attempts while struggling with his depression in these years of his life. At the time, he was convinced it would be the best thing for him and his family.

"The idea of suicide can become very seductive. I learned about it from people close



Movie Monday's Bruce Saunders scouts the video store for some choice film picks.

to me and thought that if this choice was okay for them, it was okay for me too."

Saunders's attitude towards suicide changed with healing. He found healing around the death of his sister at a Vancouver conference where a woman told her story with startling similarities to his sister.

"Though the woman was badly messed up, she was in rehab and was putting her life back together. For the first time, it occurred to me that this was a solution my sister could have had. Before that moment I'd never thought she could have taken any other course except suicide. It was the first time I properly cried about her death."

The concept of Movie Monday started after Saunders was recovering from severe depression and his second suicide attempt. He had the support he needed and his doctors found a mood stabilizer that worked well for him. He was inspired with his "hot new idea."

"While still in the hospital I had discovered a 100-seat lecture auditorium with a video projector, and the idea of showing films there for patients and ex-patients had captured my imagination. It was a modest plan but I could foresee — with hypo-manic clarity — a lot of possibilities. When people gather for popular film entertainment there are a lot of other cool things that can happen."

He began MM in 1993 by using a seven-year-old movie projector. The projector started to develop problems, threatening to break down, so the undaunted Saunders decided to go public with his condition to raise

funds for a new projector.

"I finally realized it wasn't dangerous to talk about manic depression in public. So many people are affected by mental illnesses and we are all only one degree away from it. Many of us have lost a relative or a friend to suicide and most of us struggle to understand."

It was a very positive experience for Saunders and his family because they were able to put aside the stigma of shame and secrecy so often associated with mental illnesses.

Through donations and a generous discount from Sony of Canada, MM bought a Sony Super-Bright Projector which is still in use today.

MM presented their fourth annual Reel Madness Film Festival this January, which is "five days of films and discussions about mental illness and recovery," says Saunders.

"This past June, I celebrated with good friends a 51st birthday I never thought I'd reach," says Saunders on MM's website. "I've still got an illness that I have to manage. But it's never lost on me the miracle that now I have this great privilege of presenting the pick of the film industry to vibrant, engaged audiences — downstairs in the same institution where I was once so absolutely without hope."

For more information on Movie Monday, phone 595-3542, a 24-hour line with updates and commentary on current and upcoming films or check out the website at www.islandnet.com/mm.