

2008-2021: Website description of Movie Monday and Bruce Saunders

MOVIE MONDAY started as a sparky idea from a guy recovering from a severe depression and second suicide attempt. I was on a better mood stabilizer and had the right kind of support. And I was hot on a new scheme

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.

Just a month out of hospital, with no funding and no long term plan, my friend Peter from my support group and I started. The hospital's audio-visual staff was receptive and gave me the use of the theatre. First one event, then three, then six more Mondays in a row.

That was in May 1993. Now MM is recognized as a "Best Practice" in our mental health system and has a life of its own. We've had an unbroken series of brilliant films and a parade filmmakers and special guests coming by this modest little theatre.

At first I publicized MM throughout the hospital and in my support group. When just a few showed up, I broadened my postering to hostels and drop-in centers downtown. The first few months I got butterflies in my stomach every time I thought of having to be there next Monday with the show for an expectant audience. For a person with mood swings, consistency can be a scary prospect. But I was enthusiastic about movies and it was my idea--there's nothing like ownership!

I realized early that just showing up week after week--addressing the audience, consistently putting up eclectic, creative programming, talking about mental illness and health, making at least part of our psychiatric hospital a friendly approachable place--has a pervasive effect. Even though we have a small venue, the ripples of information, positive attitude, and hope travel out into our community.

I also realized films could stimulate discourse about mental illness. The first time I presented a popular film with a mental illness theme and opportunity for discussion was "Benny and Joon". The post-film exchange was very passionate and insightful. We talked about everything from access by relatives, to treatment, to the physical shape of institutions. The discussion involved people with mental illness experience who had lots to say, but also people who were drawn there by the "popular entertainment" lure. Since that first time, MM's schedule has always included a rich peppering of films, such as "One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest", "Shine", or "Girl Interrupted", even "What About Bob". There are so many popular features which make powerful learning opportunities when presented with discussion opportunities and special guests, including "Mr. Jones", "The Snake Pit", our own Canadian Indie films like "rollercoaster" and "My Father's Angel", comedies like "Cosi" and "Dream Team", and intense personal documentaries like "Dialogues With Mad Women", "The Living Museum", "Jupiter's Wife", "A Brush With Life", and "Working Like Crazy".

A big leap in commitment and exposure to the public was made when, to raise funds for better

equipment, I was featured in an article in Victoria's city paper. It was a turning point when I weighed the risk of talking about my illness publicly. It's been a very positive move for me and my family. One of the best results of this experiment has been to shed all the baggage that comes with the usual secrecy and to make a constructive thing of our family's challenges of mental illness. Weekly now I see the healing effect of that openness. There have been many articles, radio and TV interviews, recognitions and awards since.

We've won three awards as variously Best Place to See A Movie and Favourite Screening Series by Victoria's arts weekly, I'm a Giraffe (for sticking my neck out), twice nominated for Courage To Come Back (back and back...), an MDA award at the Christmas Banquet '94. I've spoken to the Golden Key International Honour Society, the top 15% scholastic achievers (I admitted I made it through just one year in Fine Arts there, but they listened up), and spoken to and showed a film series to Cognitive Neuroscience and Social Work and students there and been a consultant and managed to embed some excellence documentaries in a course about mental illness, Soc 435.

We produced a series of Reel Madness Film Festival - "five days of films and discussions about mental illness and recovery" as well as groups of films about Aboriginal issues and Homelessness. Several off-shoots have started up following our model of films and discussions, including Vancouver's Frames Of Mind and Nanaimo's Mid Week Movies. I'm weekly in touch with folks as far away as India and Australia to respond to requests about titles we've shown and to do phone-in Q&A's.

Now, fifteen years and almost 1000 events later, the MOVIE MONDAY project is still a consuming interest and creative expression for me. My day job - landscape maintenance gardening - is thriving. Our family is too. My wife and I are celebrating our 34th anniversary and my two sons are going on to challenging post-secondary education and jobs - and they're kind of proud of the old guy. Through my openness they're far better prepared with knowledge about BP and depression and strategies to stay out of trouble than past generations in our family ever were. Through this whole 15 years period the MM initiative has redefined us as a family.

This June, I celebrated with good friends a 58th birthday I never thought I'd reach. We're screening the first film we ever showed - Cannery Row, this time with it's director David Ward calling in from Santa Monica to talk to our audience about the story behind that sweet little film.

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.

Some things I've figured out:

Just show up. 75% of being successful is "just being there" to participate. Consistency is a challenge for a person with a mood disorder but people will start to realize you're reliable, will follow through - if you make that a priority.

- A note book is 50% the solution to "just showing up". Just keep habitually checking a little pocket sized notebook and pretty soon it'll be full of intriguing things to do.
- Passion and persistence, as Patch Adams describes in his book, *Gesundheit*, is a key to health and happiness. Find something you care about and pursue it - with passion.
- Being out about my mental health challenges has been all good for me and my family. Shedding the self imposed shadow of the stigma that goes with M I is incredibly freeing.
- Find a physician you can work with. Don't accept a one way relationship. It's got to be respectful, well informed, and balanced.
- The power of peer support is essential. Books, films and real people you'll meet through support groups (MDA) will reinforce recovery, give you a trail to follow out of the wilderness.

July 2008