

Trials and Triumphs of the Early Days of our Clubhouse

by Allan Hobbs

Our History

In my experience as a founding member of Mosaic Clubhouse in South London, I can tell you that our birth and progress have been both challenging and exciting. Our reward is an already active and dynamic community, waiting impatiently to move into our permanent premises next spring. We have had our problems, as you will see, the greatest of these being lack of space. However, with careful planning our Manager, Riola Crawford, has avoided many of the pitfalls, and together we have created perhaps the greatest of all our assets -- lasting goodwill throughout our Borough and beyond.

I had been seeing Professor Tom Craig, our community psychiatrist, for about nine months when in early 1993 he told me about clubhouse. He had visited a number of clubhouses here in the States and was anxious to set one up for the London Borough of Lambeth. Would I like to help in setting it up?

Professor Craig introduced me to my now close friend and co-founding member Reg Tabrum, who had already been looking for suitable premises for the clubhouse. I joined him in this, and together we visited other UK clubhouses. We began to get the feel of what a good clubhouse should be. I was invited to sit on the interview panel to select a clubhouse coordinator. We had more or less decided on a candidate when Professor Craig said, "The final decision is with you, Allan. Do you think you can work successfully with him?" I was really moved at being asked -- it was my first taste of clubhouse member empowerment -- and at that moment my involvement and enthusiasm for clubhouse became commitments.

The new clubhouse was to replace a Day Hospital which had run for some years in the same premises. This was unfortunate. A fresh start in new premises would have made the conversion a lot easier. Reg and I soon found ourselves in difficulty. Quite understandably almost everyone who was currently attending the Day Hospital felt let down. There was security and comfort in a rigidly structured day, being told what to do, group discussions, art and pottery, one to one counseling, free tea and coffee, and a hot meal. Above all, the transition meant that the Day Hospital staff would all be leaving. It is not exaggerating to say that for several months Reg and I were seen as villains.

In discussions, it became clear that the Day Hospital clients had many fears about clubhouse, centered on having to make personal decisions. They were concerned about having to make decisions about what time to spend at the clubhouse, what unit to choose to work in, and mostly they were worried that they had nothing to offer and might be pressured against their will. Better attend a Day Hospital elsewhere, many of them concluded. The clubhouse in Dartford, Endeavour House, gave our group an

excellent presentation on clubhouse which allayed some anxieties. But Reg and I had a real struggle against prejudice and fear. Professor Craig, at our request, spoke further with our group of potential members, but many of the fears still persisted.

What we really needed was a manager, with clubhouse experience. We advertised, and Reg sat on the selection panel. They had no difficulty in selecting Riola Crawford, whom Reg described to me as "as a breath of fresh air." On her first day with us Riola told us that she shared John Beard's philosophy - that people with mental illness have already been subjected to so much that is negative that they deserve the best, and that we must make sure they get it. With those words, and Riola's obvious commitment to them, Mosaic Clubhouse became a reality, something for all of us to strive for and maintain, to build brick upon brick, and to never stop building.

The Beginnings of the Work-Ordered Day

We had been given a small office in the premises we still share with a mental health centre. Reg and I had given it a coat of paint (which made it our own). Riola, and five members, then set about creating what is now becoming a magnet for potential members, funders, and mental health professionals alike. We have been so successful, and we will continue to grow and succeed for two essential reasons: one, that we carefully follow the proven clubhouse standards and two, that each one of us is fully involved and aware of every aspect of our progress.

It is our progress because all of us have helped to fix our budget, run our finances, make our own policies (however long it takes to reach consensus) select TE placements, deal with our correspondence, produce and publish our own statistics and a widely read weekly newsletter, and produce delicious food for our frequent receptions. Not only are we demolishing the old attitudes about mental illness, not only can we raise funds when we need them, not only do we receive tremendous support and encouragement from our local community, not only are we in demand for presentations but - stop and think . Think how we feel. This clubhouse of which we feel so proud belongs to us. Together we created this success, and together we support and celebrate and care for each other.

Within days of our opening there was meaningful work for all of us, the work which sprang spontaneously from the needs of the clubhouse. Members have skills and talents and all of them are needed. We worked hard but we really enjoyed the work. Already we felt we belonged in that work, that we were needed, and that right before our eyes we were beginning to create a clubhouse which belonged to each one of us. Wow! It was powerful stuff at the time, but we couldn't really grasp what was yet in store for us.

Prior to Riola's arrival we had put out a newsletter - a few pages. The whole process was a bit of a scramble, but we felt a strong need to be heard, and to hear from other

clubhouses, as well as keeping members and potential members informed as to how our clubhouse was developing.

It wasn't long before Riola suggested that we put out a weekly newsletter. We produced every reason under the sun why we couldn't do it -- time, not enough contributors, a very old and temperamental photocopier, not enough typists, the typewriter was needed for correspondence.

You name it, we trotted it out.

Anyone who knows Riola will smile when I say that it wasn't long before we put out a weekly newsletter. We somehow found more contributors, typists, and offers of practical help, including collating, stapling, spell checking, and addressing. A few weeks ago we put out a twenty page newsletter, concentrated on TEP.

It is an important function of the clerical unit to produce the newsletter, but the production doesn't stay within the unit. Our newsletter production draws on all the clubhouse units. It is always a dash at the last minute and it's great to see members waiting impatiently to help in any way they can. We are very proud of our newsletter; it brings us all together in a common task. It goes to all of our 194 members, and an additional 150 copies go overseas and to the many who have shown particular interest in us. A good, well put together newsletter can be a vital influence in changing traditional attitudes toward mental illness.

As we grew in membership, financial requirements, and the resultant correspondence, more work was generated and more members became involved. It is the essence of the work we do that it is generated by the growing needs of the clubhouse and that more and more members come forward to meet those needs. To feel needed, to have your skills appreciated, to become one of a team working closely together with a sense of shared ownership, are all exciting and restorative experiences, particularly when a clubhouse is new and growing. My self confidence was improving. I enjoyed the work and the company, and best of all I could see the same thing happening to everyone else around me.

Soon our office space was too small for our work load. We had so much work, we had little time to spend with those using the downstairs room as a drop in. So we moved the work downstairs. Proper morning and unit meetings began, and the food services unit began to provide us with lunch: more work for more members, generated by a real need. We found a reception desk, and began "signing in and out" sheets to record our growth. This meant more work, more members involved, and more members appreciated. We recently located the new member services unit in the office upstairs - again, more real work to meet a real need, drawing us together in a real, dynamic community, staff and members alike.



Soon after her arrival, other members and I began to attend meetings around the Borough with Riola. We presented at meetings of the NHS trust, social services, organizations involved with our funding, and anywhere our culture and policies were debated or needed to be known.

There were varying degrees of shock and surprise at members attending important meetings, particularly budgeting and financial. There was even more shock and surprise when we were seen to know what we were talking about, and to have relevant and useful ideas of our own. We were, and continue to be knowledgeable, because we have all worked together on every aspect of our clubhouse's development.

Transitional Employment

We didn't lose any time starting our TE programme, despite our temptation to wait until everything was "perfect" in the day program. Right now we have had seventeen members out on placements, and there are more placements in the pipeline. Our placements are not boring repetitive work at a low rate of pay, but work which calls for initiative and creates new confidence and self esteem. A real job, at a real place of work, at a real rate of pay. What makes TEP successful at Mosaic Clubhouse is the support system, the willingness of the staff placement managers to learn, teach, and step in at a moment's notice, and the understanding and sympathy within the clubhouse when a member is unable to stay the course. It is an act of faith and courage to ask for a placement, let alone sustain it, and we celebrate each other whatever the circumstances.

Clubhouse Work

The work we do at Mosaic Clubhouse mirrors the world at large, but differs in three important and effective ways. One, we have a forgiving culture. The mistakes I have made have been completely forgiven. In fact I have found that forgiveness is as effective as a reprimand. It can bring a lump to my throat, and I hope I am right in saying that I have never made the same mistake twice. The second is that the work we do is noncompetitive. Those of us with responsibilities must share them with as many of our fellow members as possible. The third is the way we are able to deal with stress. We know that if the pressure gets too great we can stop for coffee and a cigarette, go home for the rest of the day or ask another member or staff member to finish the job. For me, the knowledge that I can do any of these things helps me to calm down and finish the job properly.

The fundamental importance of the work we do in clubhouse is that it is essential to our recovery from mental illness and essential to the existence and progress of our clubhouse. The two go hand in hand. Our skills are needed, and they are needed to ensure the continued growth of the clubhouse itself. We become involved in something much bigger than ourselves and each of us grows with it because it is our joint creation.

Together we share our setbacks and celebrate our recovery, supported by a dynamic community which sustains and encourages us. This process of healing and making whole is the essence of our unique clubhouse culture.

There are two vitally important factors at work in the clubhouse. First, clubhouse pioneers a fundamental change in attitudes toward mental illness. The work we are seen to do is, in the UK anyway, as unexpected as it is impressive. And secondly, the clubhouse community produces a tremendous amount of interest and goodwill: goodwill where it counts, particularly in funding. Everybody wants to help us, and to be involved, and to give us all the help they can. We are meticulous about saying thank you. There is a magic about clubhouse which demolishes barriers and replaces them with heartfelt interest and support. The work we do in and with our local community is fundamentally important to our progress, as is their acceptance of us as a vitally important programme in the community.

Autonomy

I believe that a successful clubhouse needs to be free standing and its management autonomous. Developing in premises shared with a traditional, but none the less excellent mental health centre, inevitably led to a clash of cultures. It wasn't long before our neighbours became unhappy with the access we have to areas they deem private, which they felt would undermine their relationships with their clients, or risk breaches of confidentiality. An official complaint was made, meetings were held and a compromise thrashed out, but the relationship since then has been a little strained. At a more serious level, a psychiatrist threw a farewell party, and invited only the clubhouse staff. The party was held in our space. Several of us put our names to a newsletter article entitled "invisible barriers," which made it clear that not only was an important principle at stake but that it also damaged a vital relationship. Reverberations continue to this day. An apology on our part might heal a slightly cool relationship, but we have no intention of giving one. The principle at stake is far too important to us.

So we eagerly work toward the move to our new premises next spring!

Shortly before Riola's arrival, we were offered a fine old house in a quiet residential street. It is easy to see now that the space was too limited, but it took Riola's experience and vision to see immediately that we would need larger premises.

The first reception we gave as a clubhouse, was for us to meet potential members of our Board-to-be and for us all to meet Kenn Dudek, Executive Director of Fountain House, on his way home from a visit to the Moscow Clubhouse. Riola had the foresight to also invite the local government councillor in whose ward our new clubhouse lies. He turned out to be very direct and asked some very searching questions. It later transpired that he was on the planning committee to consider our application for change of user. His knowledge of us and what we are planning must have played a part in permission

being granted. A few months later, Lambeth Social Services offered us a fine old Georgian mansion standing in about an acre of land.

On a less tasteful note, we have had our fair share of objections from local residents - the "not in my back yard" brigade. With the first building, a meeting was held in a local resident's house and the questions and concerns were polite and, in most cases, very reasonable.

A few days after the meeting we heard that they would welcome us.

In the case of the Georgian mansion, which we are to move into next spring, we had a harder time. We invited the main objector and his wife to a meeting with about a dozen of us, where we had a two-hour discussion about the clubhouse. Nonetheless, a subsequent meeting was called in the local library at which some of our members were subjected to an unpleasant display of ignorance and prejudice, being spoken about as if they were not there or could not speak for themselves. Tempers were frayed and voices raised, but not by our members. As the chairman of the meeting pointed out, any bad behaviour seemed to be on the part of the residents. He commended the clubhouse members on their restraint.

Overall, how fortunate we have been. Trials have turned into triumphs. Mosaic Clubhouse has an impetus of its own.

Our Future

Each one of us knows that we are going places, together, and that we will be joined by others as the time unfolds. It is an exciting prospect. Just today we have received details of a World Conference for Psychosocial Rehabilitation in Rotterdam next spring. We are already discussing it -- not whether or not we should go -- but how many members and staff we can afford to take, and who will make their maiden speech.

It has been a wonderful fourteen months. It is up to each one of us to make the future as good. If not better.

Allan Hobbs is a member of Mosaic Clubhouse in London, England.