

Being There for Each Other

Phyllis Moss gave the following speech at Toronto's Women Take Back the Night rally in September



My name is Phyllis Moss. I am here as a woman and also as a representative of On Our Own – a self-help group for survivors of psychiatry. I am the coordinator of On Our Own.

On August 9, ten years ago, three ex-inmates formed their own "mutual

support system" rather accidentally – they just got together and started talking out their problems. They decided that it had worked so well for them that they would like to share this concept with others. They placed a small ad in the *Toronto Star*, saying that, if other ex-inmates would be interested

in this kind of alternative, they could attend a meeting at a particular church one evening. Instead of the ten or 20 people they expected to see, 150 people showed up.

The Ontario Mental Patients' Association was formed. To assist with expenses, members started working

the flea markets. The markets proved to be successful enough to start a drop-in. More important, this activity brought out the fact that there was a desperate need for alternative forms of "rehabilitation." We had to get back into the swing of living and working and giving ourselves back the feeling of self-worth that was sorely lacking in our lives.

It's ten years later, and we have become a visible part of our community. Our group is now called On Our Own (based on the title of a book by activist Judi Chamberlin). We have a drop-in, offices, a used goods store (The Mad Market) and a newsletter (*The Mad Grapevine*) – and we publish *Phoenix Rising*. We operate a community food bank through the organizations Daily Bread and Second Harvest. We have also become recognized as an active advocacy group. Our views and voices have been raised and heard. Eventually, we will open a hassle-free clinic, staffed by our own members, for people going through life-crisis situations.

Although I can't speak for all our members, my story is probably quite typical. When a public health nurse I knew told me about this group, it was a very low time in my life. I had just come out from over a year in the mental ward of a hospital – a year that seemed like a lifetime. My hospitalization had brought about the breakdown of my marriage, causing a separation.

For the first time, I was faced with living for myself – considering *me* first. I wasn't equipped for this new life, nor was I strong enough to handle it. I couldn't work. I was medicated, and confused about some of the demands of day-to-day survival. I was fortunate, though, because I still had my children as a support system. (Most mothers don't have that when they get out.) It was time to get on with my life – but alone this time.

I started out doing what I could – volunteering for a few hours each week at the Mad Market. Later, I took part in a learning program set up by the market, to learn electrical appliance repairs. I was able to start a full-time job, and have just recently left that to become the coordinator of

On Our Own. During those years, as I became more involved with the group, I became active on the board, and worked my way through to the presidency. Without that initial phone call, I don't really know what my life would be today. In fact, I don't know if I would still exist.

I will always feel grateful to have found this "alternative" – a group of people who really do know the meaning of the word help, and who really care about each other.

Since taking over the position of coordinator, I've become so much more aware of other people's problems. It isn't just ex-psychiatric inmates who are going through hell – it's a very large percentage of our population. It's people like you and me, who can't find housing, who are going hungry, who can't find work. And then there are the additional problems of the loneliness of the elderly and the vulnerability of the young. Where do they go with their questions – and how do they eat the answers they are given? Next year, next month, next week – even tomorrow may be too late.

Most people have no idea where to turn or how they can get answers. I hope that On Our Own has been able to help in one small way. But have you actually ever sat down and asked yourself what you can do as an individual?

We have been able to accomplish a great deal just by being there for one another, understanding the daily trials and tribulations of trying to recover, and helping ourselves and others become active members of the community again. What we have learned, through all our pain and confusion, is that we are good human beings – able to extend our hearts and hands to our brothers and sisters. There are many days when you may wonder if it is all worthwhile; but then you have someone give you a hug and say, "Thank you for loving and caring about me," and you know that it is.