



Champion COMMUNITY Page

Agency helps afflicted help themselves

BY IRENE GENTLE
The Champion

Eleven years ago, Christine Krawczyk swallowed what she hoped were enough pills to end her life.

Only instead of dying, she landed in a hospital psychiatric ward.

The doctors said she had a borderline personality disorder and was suffering from suicidal depression. She was 16 years-old.

Today, Ms Krawczyk is still diagnosed with a borderline personality disorder but she is also the 27-year-old program director at Teach, Empower, Advocate for Community Health (TEACH).

TEACH is Halton's first and only agency addressing the information and advocacy needs of the mentally ill by the mentally ill.

It is estimated that one in five Canadians will suffer from a mental illness at some point in their lives.

Despite being open just three months, the word is out about TEACH. Its grand opening in December attracted 65 people, almost double what was anticipated. As well, they receive about 100 e-mails per day.

Sometimes, it's about companionship. Ms Krawczyk has approximately 16 clients she visits just to keep company.

Most often TEACH acts as an information service, doling out the facts on everything from medication to doctor referral lists.

It's an agency Ms Krawczyk could have used once herself.

"I was in a psychiatric ward with people who were twice my age and obviously more ill than I was," she recalled. "It was a terrifying experience."

TEACH was the brainchild of Chris Geisbrecht, who petitioned the Ministry of Health with his concept of an information and advocacy agency run for the mentally ill, by those who know firsthand what the challenges are.

At first, his idea was rejected. He took his own life before he could see it brought to fruition.

Now TEACH is run by people who believe in that premise as passionately as Mr. Geisbrecht did. It operates on a \$77,000 budget provided by the Ministry of Health.

"It's very much a legacy to Chris," said Ms

Krawczyk.

TEACH has also been good to Ms Krawczyk, who has managed to stay out of hospitals for the past five years.

She has struggled to keep her life on track. So she is thrilled to be working to help others find their way, too.

"I'm the only staff member right now. I'm busy and I love it," she said.

TEACH's helping hand extends to the families of people suffering from mental illnesses.

"A lot of families have difficulties going to visit a loved one in a psychiatric ward because there's a stigma," she said.

"I offer them as much information as possible on the particular illness. I tell them what it's like and what they can expect."

For the sufferers themselves, Ms Krawczyk uses information to combat what she sees as a current tendency to medicate first and explain later.

"I know from personal experience that there's less and less therapy and more and more medication given out," she said.

Despite this, many don't have good information on the drugs they're ingesting.

"Some people we talked to had no idea that the medication they're taking had certain side effects, said Ms Krawczyk.

She is careful not to lay blame at the feet of the medical community.

"With cutbacks there's an awful lot of clients as compared to nurses," she said. "We're trying hard not to step on anyone's toes. The health professionals we've talked to have been very supportive of us."

In the new year, TEACH is hoping to forge an even better relationship with local hospitals.

"My goal is to work directly with the staff in hospitals to let people know we're out there," said Ms Krawczyk.

In the meantime, Ms Krawczyk battles the stigma of mental illness.

"There are very high functioning consumers out there who want to make a difference like myself," she said. "We're people, too. We're entitled to the same rights as others."

TEACH is located at 225 Main Street East, suite eight in Milton. For more information call 693-8771 or e-mail teach@interhop.net



Photo by GRAHAM PAINE

Program director Christine Krawczyk has been run off her feet since the debut of TEACH, the only agency in Halton providing information and advocacy by and for the mentally ill.

New officer is on the beat

Milton has a new patrol officer after police swore in 12 recruits recently.

Constable Trent Chalecky joined the ranks of the Halton Regional Police Service and has been assigned to town.

Born in Saskatchewan, Constable Chalecky moved to Cambridge at an

early age and lived there most of his life.

He attended Carleton University in Ottawa, where he received a bachelor of arts in law and sociology. He worked as a purchaser, youth worker and bike patroller for the City of Cambridge prior to his appointment with Halton police.

College course is on the web

Work and family responsibilities often make it difficult to pursue part-time studies, so Sheridan College is making it a little easier.

Back for a third session since its launch last year is Sheridan's first course offered through the Internet — Marketing on the Web. This unique learning opportunity is designed for mature students who thrive on

independent study at times that suit them, yet appreciate interaction with fellow pupils and the instructor.

Applications are being accepted for the next session, which begins January 16. To register or for more information, contact Professor David Nowell at 845-9430, ext. 2860 or via e-mail: david.nowell@sheridanc.on.ca.

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