

# System survivors demand voice

*Mental health system needs reform, new lobby group says*

BY LISA QUEEN  
Staff Writer

Almost nonchalantly, Julie Fawm thymes off a long list of distressing events that led up to her first suicide attempt.

She was pressured into terminating two pregnancies by an abusive boyfriend, had a rocky relationship with her family, bladder surgery, a car accident and — worst of all — zero self-esteem.

"I guess you could say I was very conservative and naive, very naive, really naive," said Ms Fawm, who credits many techniques with making her a strong and independent woman today.

"I did whatever anybody said to do. I didn't know I could say no. I didn't know I could be assertive."

After a "crummy" Christmas in 1993, the Richmond Hill resident fell into a deep depression.

"I kind of more or less crashed."

A couple of weeks after the holidays, she downed a bottle of pills.

"I had had enough. The emotion was to the point where I couldn't handle anything anymore."

But shortly after swallowing the medication, she called 911 and ended up in the psychiatric ward of North York General Hospital.

Despite receiving psychiatric intervention at North York General and York Central hospitals over the next three years, Ms Fawm tried to kill herself another four times.

In 1995, two of her friends succeeded.

Ms Fawm feels her journey through the mental health system was generally positive, which she attributes to her pliant nature. She accepted any treatment offered by medical experts.

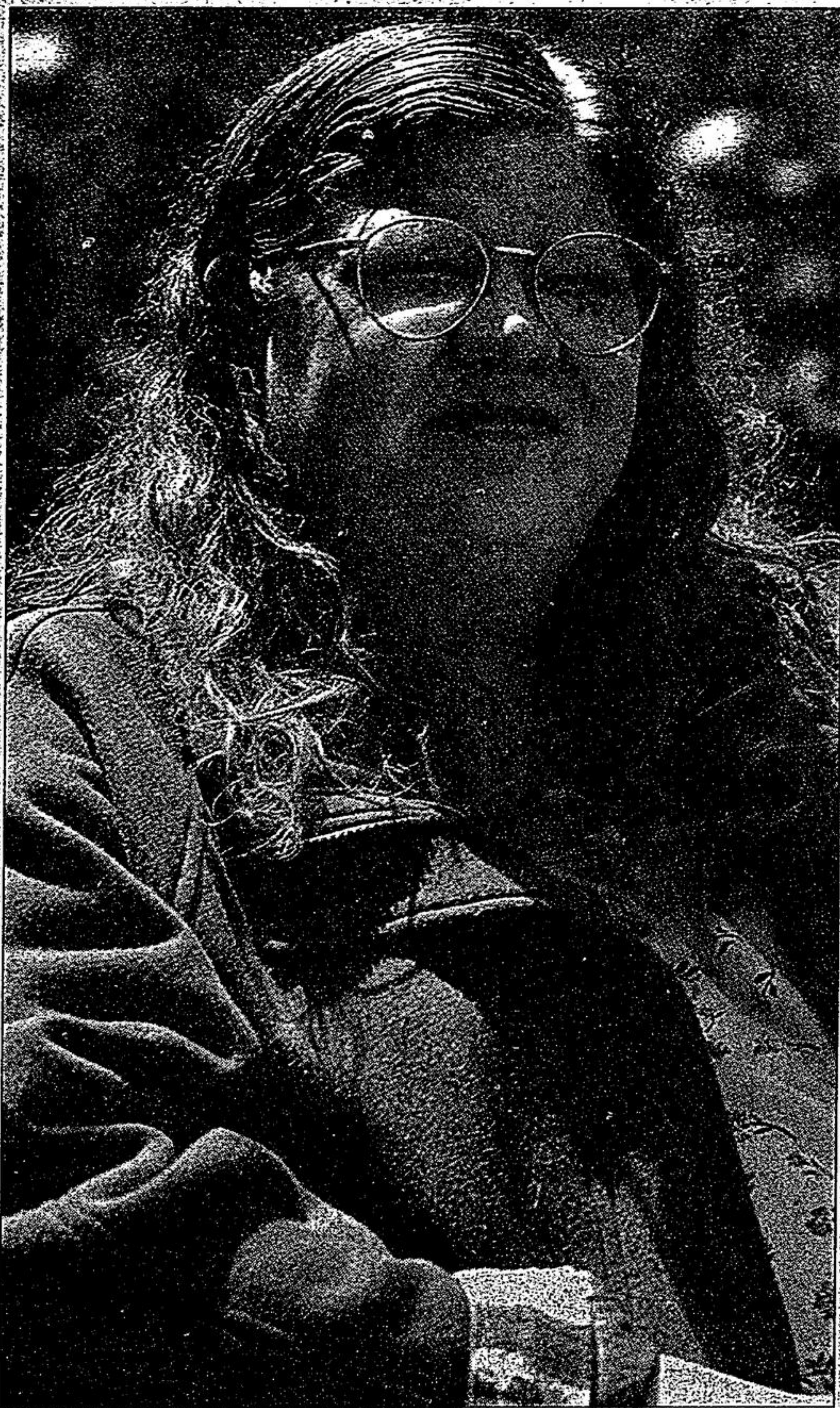
"I'm easy-going. I go along with whatever."

On the other hand, she has heard horror stories from others who have navigated the psychiatric system.

"They have been doped up, they wouldn't be able to see a doctor, they were restrained, they were confined to a room and locked inside the room," she said.

It's because of those tales — and because she knows the system does have strengths upon which to build — Ms Fawm has become a board member and volunteer secretary for the fledgling York Consumer Survivors.

Co-founder Linda Tuplin described the group, being launched June 17 at the Aurora



STAFF PHOTO/BILL ROBERTS

Julie Fawm of Richmond Hill is volunteer secretary of the new York Consumer Survivors, a group of people who have been through the mental health system and are seeking reforms.

Public Library, as a team of York Region psychiatric consumers who want to improve the system.

"Being involved in the mental health system, we've seen the problems. We really want a voice in making some changes," said Ms Tuplin, a Holland Landing resident who has bipolar disorder.

"Right now, (people with mental illnesses) don't have a voice. There's a lot of people making decisions for them. I don't believe you should force someone to get the kind of help you feel they should have if it's not what they think they need."

Ms Tuplin was a member of a provincial task force investigating ways to improve the mental health system.

However, she and other psychi-

atric consumers quit in disgust last year because they felt their voices weren't being heard at Queen's Park.

"It got bogged down in government bureaucracy, with their own agenda," she said.

"We felt we were tokens, just so they could say consumers were consulted. But we weren't being taken seriously. Many of us resigned en masse. We felt we needed a local forum."

Governments aren't the only ones denying people with mental illnesses a voice, Ms Tuplin said.

"People think people with mental health problems are not smart, aren't educated, can't make their own decisions. There's a slogan: 'If you have a brain, you can have mental illness.'"

She added there's a widespread belief medication is the answer to all psychiatric problems.

"A lot of people see medication as the be all and end all. I don't want to say medication is wrong, but there needs to be other options available as well," she said.

Ms Fawm acknowledged medication did help her turn her life around, although she complained she gained 60 pounds on lithium.

But she stressed it took much more than pills.

A veteran of Depressed Anonymous, Ms Fawm participated in numerous workshops through hospitals and the Canadian Mental Health Association, depended on an association social worker, listened to personal affirmation and relaxation tapes by Oprah Winfrey and Dr. Phil, learned mottoes to help her regain her footing if she feels herself becoming agitated or depressed and relied on a supportive boyfriend.

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Although she survives on disability benefits, Ms Fawm is volunteering as an information hotline operator at the Krasman Centre, a Richmond Hill mental health agency, and sits on an advisory committee for the Simcoe-York District Health Council.

"I'm a strong person, a person who knows her boundaries, a person who can say no, a person who has the right to do whatever is within my means," she said, adding she still copes with anxiety when trying new activities.

"I didn't know who I was until I went through the system. The workshops gave me life skills. Depressed Anonymous, it makes me proud to see how far I've come. Doing positive self-affirmation was a lifeline. I still do deep breathing and relaxation. It's been like a new beginning, a new birth."

"It was a long road, it was a long struggle but it makes you feel good that you've succeeded in something."

For more information about York Consumer Survivors, which meets out of the Krasman Centre, call 905-780-0491 or 1-888-780-0724 ext. 17.

# Lot levy hike may halt retail projects

BY SIMONE JOSEPH  
Staff Writer

Retail developers say they will cancel building projects in York Region if development charges skyrocket.

"I have the luxury of not building these developments and looking elsewhere," said Art Welter, vice-president of development for the Trinity Development Group Inc., which built the Colossus Centre in Vaughan.

The development company has a large project planned for Richmond Hill and a smaller one for Aurora.

The region is proposing to hike development charges to pay for expected population growth and demand for infrastructure, as well as help fund its transit plans, which include introducing a system of light rail transit vehicles and buses.

"It (the increase) is necessary to meet growing demands for transit," finance commissioner Sandra Cartwright said at a committee meeting last week.

Transit development charges used to be paid at the municipal level, but since the region's transit systems have been combined, these charges are a regional responsibility.

Retail companies have said they were taken off guard by the region's plan to increase development charges by as much as \$10.73 per square foot.

"We would have never anticipated this," Mr. Welter said.

Steven Zakem, a lawyer for Fortinos and Loblaws, said the company had plans to build six stores in York Region, but if development charges are increased, the projects may be cancelled.

A development charge increase should not come as a surprise, York Region chairperson Bill Fisch said, considering the region has been discussing the change for about two years.

York already has the highest residential development charges in the 905 region, according to a staff report.

In a comparison of charges for retail development, the region ranked second to Halton. It is not known how York Region will compare in future because York is introducing a new bylaw a year ahead of other regions.

The development charge bylaw is scheduled to be adopted by council Thursday and is set to be enacted June 23.

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