

# Who we are, what we do, why

ON OUR OWN is a self-help group of present and former psychiatric inmates based in Toronto. We celebrated our 5th anniversary on August 9th. Three ex-psychiatric inmates founded the group in 1977, mainly to provide mutual support for ex-inmates and help them survive in the community. In 1979, we became incorporated as a non-profit, charitable organization. We presently have almost 300 members. Membership is FREE.

There are only two rules for becoming an ON OUR OWN member: present or previous psychiatric treatment *and* participating in one of our activities or meetings.

Our chief objectives are: to provide emotional and social supports to members and other ex-inmates; to provide social, recreational and educational activities for members; to provide job-training opportunities and financial assistance (whenever

possible) for members; to educate members and the general public about the "mental health" system; to network with other self-help groups with similar objectives.

ON OUR OWN is run democratically and totally controlled by its members. At our monthly general meetings, members are free to discuss and vote on policy and other issues. All policy decisions are reached by majority vote or consensus.

Since 1978, ON OUR OWN has had an elected board of directors; election to the board is held once a year or whenever there's a vacancy. All members are equally eligible for election to the board or any committee. We now have a seven-member board; its responsibilities are to oversee all activities of the group, make policy recommendations (not policy decisions) to the membership and carry out all policy decisions of the members. We also have five permanent committees which help us organize various activities or projects: Finance Committee; Store Committee; Speakers' Committee; *Phoenix Rising* Editorial Collective; Social-Rec Committee.

During our first two years of existence, we had no funding. We survived by selling donated goods at flea market booths on weekends. Since 1980, we have received various government grants which have allowed us to hire seven staff, pay expenses to volunteers and expand our major activities: the office, drop-in, The Mad Market (our non-profit, used goods store) and *Phoenix Rising*, our quarterly magazine.

Currently, we manage a yearly budget of roughly \$150,000. People who work as staff or volunteers must be members, a group policy.

The Mad Market, our non-profit used goods store, was established in June 1980. The store is run by staff, trainees and volunteers, all ON OUR OWN members. The store's two chief purposes are to generate income for the group and to provide job-training opportunities for interested members. Store sales have doubled or tripled within the past year. At least twenty members have received valuable training experiences; some have found jobs as a result of their store experiences and growth in self-confidence. Because of its limited budget, the store must rely on donated goods; our van driver picks up donations anywhere in Metro Toronto. We are most appreciative of any donation.

Educationally and politically, ON OUR OWN has been very active. *Phoenix Rising* is the group's educational arm. Its chief purpose is to serve as an organizing tool. Within the past year, the magazine has helped to spark the growth of at least two ex-psychiatric inmate-controlled groups in Ontario. The magazine also provides a lot of useful information about many abuses in Canada's "mental health" system such as forced drugging, electroshock, involuntary commitment and violations of inmates' human or legal rights. Other features include international news and in-depth articles on alternatives such as the Psychiatric Inmates Liberation

Movement, which includes ON OUR OWN and many other anti-psychiatry groups in North America and Europe. In addition, we publish a bi-monthly newsletter, The Mad Grapevine, which is free to all members and supporters.

Our Speakers' Committee currently consists of seven members. Its two purposes are to educate mental health professionals and the public about our issues and provide valuable public speaking experiences for interested members. During the past two years, we have accepted numerous invitations to speak about ON OUR OWN as well as treatment and rights issues to professional and community groups, college and university students and other self-help groups in Ontario, Manitoba, Alberta and Saskatchewan.

Government funding has not stopped us from taking strong political stands or action. For example, in June 1981 we helped to organize a successful demonstration protesting the serious lack of low-cost housing for ex-inmates in Toronto. Last year, we became a member of the Supportive Housing Coalition which has been pressing the Government of Ontario to provide more affordable housing for ex-inmates. ON OUR OWN is also a founding member of the Coalition On Psychiatric Services (a coalition of 8 health advocacy groups), which has also been pressing the government for almost two years to call an independent public investiga-

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1985, when the Human Rights Act becomes law. "A two and a half year delay before the tribunal is able to enforce its rulings is totally unacceptable," said Weiss.

The Coalition also campaigned to have a section that would prevent a group or individual from appealing a decision by the Human Rights Commission dealing with modifications to a work place. Such plans might be to create access for disabled persons, but the plans may not be adequate, said Weiss. She saw the lack of an appeal process in this situation as a "dangerous withdrawal of legal recourse."

## No Protection

Now that the amendments will not receive third reading, groups which were intended to be protected under the legislation have no protection from discrimination, particularly the mentally ill and the mentally handicapped, said Weiss. Physically handicapped persons already have some protection under the act, she said. While this situation is far

from satisfactory, Weiss said it is preferable to having the offending sections become law.

The campaign will now continue to have the amendments re-introduced without the specific sections. Weiss said the effort will focus on federal cabinet members and on Canadian Human Rights Commissioner Gordon Fairweather, who played a major role in the drafting of the amendments.

MPA was one of the several organizations to send telegrams to the federal government to protest the amendments. Weiss said she does not know how many groups took part in the protest, but she said the effort had some success in preventing the amendments from becoming law. Now there is at least another chance for groups affected by the amendments to have the offending sections dropped. "It would have been worse if they had gone through," she said.

The amendments were intended to protect people against discrimination in the federal civil service, the Armed Forces, crown corporations, banks and utility companies.

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tion into psychiatric "treatment" in the province. More recently ON OUR OWN was elected to host this year's Tenth Annual International Conference on Human Rights and Psychiatric Oppression, which was held 14-18 in Toronto, the first time the conference has been held outside the United States.

We are proud of our accomplishments. We are proud we have survived this long. We are proud of the fact that we have proved to ourselves and to other people that psychiatric inmates and former inmates can support each other and run their own lives.

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