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A WEEK IN THE LIFE WITH MPA  
IMPRESSIONS OF THE WEST END HOUSE  
(Part I)

I'd been wanting to come out to/x Vancouver to visit and rap and just be with MPA people for many months/ now. The newsletter, which MPA has been sending me in Toronto since/// last winter, and my brief but en-// couraging correspondence with Lanny Beckman turned me on. I felt I had to see and experience MPA for my-// self--partly because I'm naturally/ curious about any innovative ideas/ or projects involving mental pa-/// tients generally, and partly be-/// cause I've heard some good things// about MPA like the patient-con-//// trolled houses, the drop-in, poli-// tical education and patient advoca-// cy activities.

With the possible exception of// Tribal--a LIP-OFY funded project/// which has two small houses--there// is nothing like MPA in Toronto, nor in the rest of Canada and the USA./ When I rapped with Phil Brown of/// ROUGH TIMES on his visit, he said// the same thing. Besides, as a for-// mer psychologist and mental patient I know what damn little the mental/ health establishment has done for// hospitalized and discharged mental/ patients. So, since MPA exists, I/ felt I had to check it out by rap-// ping and just living with people in one of the houses.

In early August, I decided to// take the plunge by coming out to/// Vancouver. After a maddeningly//// frustrating and seemingly endless// 3-day trip on a greyhound bus, I/// arrived around midnight on Saturday August 11th. I was tired, grimy// and just pissed off at the milk-/// stop bus trip, so I checked into/// the Y that night. The next morning I phoned the drop-in which put me// onto Clyde, a coordinator at the/// West End house. Clyde had heard I/ might be coming out; he sounded//// friendly and invited me to come out that morning. He also was up-front in telling me he couldn't guarantee

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me a room in the house because that decision, like all others affecting the house, had to be made by all/// the residents. The decision as to/ whether or not I could stay would// be made that afternoon at the week-// ly house meeting. This sounded//// cool to me; that was my first real/ clue that the house was being run// democratically.

Loaded down with too much gear,/ I lumbered up the steps of a big/// green and yellow 3-storey house//// with a tall, flowering green tree// on the front lawn. As I met and// began rapping with Clyde, Tom and a few other people in the house, I/// felt easier and welcomed. A few/// minutes after arriving, the house// meeting began; Clyde chaired the/// meeting and invited me to sit in.// DeeDee, the other house coordina-// tor, Tom, Gary, Dave, Norm, Danny// and one or two other people all sat around in the comfortable living/// room for about 1½ hours, though it/ seemed much less. I recall Clyde// first reading out the agenda in a// firm, measured voice, sticking to// the agenda yet allowing everyone/// who felt like it to express their// own views and opinions on various// issues and problems. The residents made all decisions through open,/// majority voting--like their agree-// ment to raise the monthly food con-// tribution by \$3 because of the out-// of-sight food price increases.//// There was also a lot of honest dis-// cussion about Jim, whom many people were uptight about, mainly because/ he had frequently violated one or// more house rules and was apparently bugging a lot of people. Although/ Jim was absent from the meeting (he had missed a few others too) the/// residents decided to bar him, in-// sisting that he leave by Wednesday.

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(It turned out Jim finally left//// Saturday, the same day I left.)

At one point during the meeting/ Clyde introduced me and asked me to state my purpose for wanting to////

~~stay in the house for a week~~



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stay in the house for a week. I/// simply said I wanted to learn more// about MPA, and that with whatever// information or knowledge I picked// up in the house, I might start a/// similar group in Toronto. Clyde/// then asked me to leave while the/// residents voted on me. Their deci- sion came surprisingly fast--five// minutes later, Gary came to tell me the vote was unanimous and that I// would be allowed to stay one week./ I was obviously relieved and happy// and soon began cleaning up the at- tic room assigned me. Eight other/ people were living in the house//// while I was there.

Around 5 that afternoon, we had/ a big and delicious dinner which/// Clyde prepared. I learned that//// everyone in the house is expected// to share in the cooking, washing/// and cleaning up; for example, each/ resident is expected to take turns/ preparing and serving the dinner/// for the whole house. Breakfast and lunch are each resident's personal/ responsibility. I started wonder- ing when my turn would come and I// began feeling a little anxious.//// (Eventually I volunteered for Fri- day.) At the house, the food was// always plentiful, tasty and varied. After dinner, I went up to my room/~~and~~ and looked out of my window. I//// could see the dark blue bay and the mountains beyond. I felt at home.

Sunday, Dave asked me to go with him for a walk along Kitsilano///// Beach. The day was cool, sunny and bright, as Dave and I walked along/ ~~the beach~~ ~~the white sandy beach and the~~ the white, sandy beach. I don't/// know about Dave, but I started to// get high and horny just looking at/ all the bikini-clad women lolling// around. I saw one topless woman/// singing along with a guy playing a/ guitar in a small group of young/// people. I took in the sparkling/// blue water, sailboats, the children splashing around nearby and the//// mountains hovering over this incre- dibly beautiful scene. It was too/

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much, a peak experience. (At one// point, Dave thoughtfully mentioned/ Wreck Beach where people go nude;/// unfortunately I never made it///// there.)

I soon began experiencing the// togetherness of the house, above all the commitment and courage of some// residents who were painfully strug- gling and often succeeding in taking more responsibilities and exerting// more control over their lives. For/ example, there was Tom who gets a/// lot of headaches and is on anti-con- vulsant pills; he was getting up al- most every morning to work at his/// part-time job with VOP to supplement his welfare, and seeing his kids on/ the weekend. Norm was in the pro-// cess of trying to find a job and//// setting up interviews after not///// working for many months or a year; I could sense some of the frustration, disappointment and tension Norm was/ experiencing through this struggle./ (I hope Norm's finally found a job// that's not menial or alienating.)/// Then there was Gary who was out al- most every night socializing and//// taking on more responsibilities in// the house and acting like another/// coordinator. Danny was beginning to get into reading, and opening up//// more than usual. And Clyde--typi-// cally kind, understanding but firm-- was almost always available to give/ needed support and reassurance,//// timely guidance or information and// generally acting coolly and respon-// sibly in crises, defusing some po-// tentially explosive situations, and/ intolerant of any bullshit. DeeDee, a newcomer, working with Clyde as a// coordinator, was reliably showing up every morning, eagerly helping out// with various personal and collective tasks and taking notes to follow up/ on.

The house was a dynamic whole,/// and there were a bare minimum of//// house rules--a definite yet flexible structure--which allowed for a lot// of change and room for personal and/ collective growth. The only house//



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rules I heard of were two--one prohibits anyone from bringing in drugs; the other forbids people from interfering with or disrupting others' privacy.

Informal rapping could and did happen daily. I saw people making important decisions or plans--not only then but during the more structured weekly house meetings on Saturday. Being a witness to such creative movement, struggles against pain, and breakthroughs was a deeply moving experience as well as privilege for me--happenings I shall never forget.

Attending MPA business meetings and listening to people rap was another important way to learn more about the strength and commitment of MPA people. On Monday, for example, I sat in on a special, strategy-planning meeting, called to discuss how MPA would deal with some neighbours' complaints about the West End House. The meeting was in preparation for MPA's presentation before the "Rankin Committee" scheduled for that Thursday. Barry, Stan, Dick, Fran, Clyde, DeeDee and I all sat around in a circle, rapping about the possible threat such complaints or criticisms might have upon the house's application for a special housing permit. The meeting was serious and provoked a lot of discussion on effective approaches and strategies. Although not present,

Lanny sent along a written statement which would be read aloud at the Rankin Committee meeting. It was this statement which proved to be a key organizing tool. It was an articulate and sufficiently comprehensive statement which included an outline of MPA's general purpose of existence and operation, a fairly detailed account of the incidents involving the house in July, the responsible ways MPA people handled these crises, and

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ple handled these crises, and a well-deserved criticism of the city's health system which has failed to provide sufficient 24-hour crisis-drop-in centers and back-up support.

The people at this meeting supported Lanny's statement, agreed that Barry should read it at the Rankin meeting and resolved to act assertively and confidently.

And that's basically what happened at the City Hall meeting on Thursday. As chairman, Rankin invited the MPA people present--Barry, Lanny, Fran, Clyde, DeeDee and Dave-- to sit around the committee table with all the aldermen, a significant event, I thought, which has rarely if ever happened at Toronto's City Hall. Rankin let Barry read the statement which he and most other aldermen listened sympathetically. The only officials who appeared critical of the MPA presentation were the Medical Health Officer who was full of bullshit rationalizations and defensive posturings, and a hypercritical, bitchy alderwoman who couldn't resist mouthing off some self-righteous, lobal cliches. Fortunately, Rankin was on MPA's side and it showed. Basically, I felt all of us who witnessed this scene believed MPA scored a success and that it would only be a matter of time before the house would get its permit.

I left the City Hall meeting feeling proud of the articulate, intelligent and responsible way MPA people came across under pressure. I also wished that Toronto and all big cities in Canada had strong, compassionate, con-resistant people like Rankin to head their health or social service committees. MPA definitely has a friend and supporter in Rankin, who appears really committed to improving mental health services in Vancouver.



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The weekly business meeting on// Tuesday gave me still another op-// portunity to see MPA people in ac-// tion. There were about 20 people// sitting around rapping on various// issues and problems and making some

hard decisions. I recall a long,// critical discussion on drop-in co-// ordinators; this problem was partly settled after people agreed that// all coordinators should rotate// drop-in shifts. At one point, Ka-// thy Carney introduced the new of-// fice coordinator who would take her place at the end of the week. I// recall some angry confrontations// between Jim (who was about to leave the West End House) and Fran, who// voluntarily chaired half the meet-// ing. She probably would have// chaired the whole meeting if it// weren't for Jim's frequent inter-// ruptions. Jim was obviously up-// tight and was almost constantly// bringing up irrelevant issues.// Fran as well as Kathy were smould-// ering; Fran finally told Jim to// shut-up; she couldn't take him any// more, and in exasperation she hand-// ed the chair over to Kathy who ac-// cepted this challenge.

Looking back, I believe if this// situation had been handled less// honestly and firmly, an ugly or vi-// olent scene might well have devel-// oped. I admired Fran and Kathy for being so upfront about their feel-// ings toward Jim, and Fran for open-// ly admitting her unwillingness to// chair at the time.

Anyway, the drop-in meeting con-// tinued with the discussion getting// back on the track. Soon after the// meeting, I overheard some people// complain that it was a lousy meet-// ing, but I felt it went surprising-// ly well, considering the threat of// numerous interruptions and irrele-// vancies. Virtually everyone who// came to the meeting stayed and

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stuck it out to the end, and were// together enough to reach some im-// portant decisions. For me, that's// an impressive demonstration of// strength and solidarity. At most// of the community meetings I've been involved in, one or two people dom-// inate the discussion by laying// their power trips on the group,// with some others getting bogged// down and tying up the meeting in// trivia so that little or no action// occurs.

On Wednesday, a couple of us// from the house pitched in to help// people in the South End House move// to their new location. For me,// moving is always one big pain in

the ass, and I felt sure it was the same for most everyone in the South House. After 2-3 hours of leading// and unloading furniture from the// truck, I felt tired and split. I// was also a little disappointed at// not seeing more South House people// around to help with the moving, but it was good meeting and rapping// with Al and Nancy, the house coor-// dinators. I could see they were// down and trying to make the best of a rough situation. I hope by now// the South House people are getting// settled, but I know it's hard, es-// pecially during the first month

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(which reminds me that I've moved// about 8 times in 11 years).

Thursday was the Rankin Commit-// tee meeting which, as I said be-// fore, was encouraging and success-// ful. Friday was my day for making// supper for the house. Even with// Clyde's help, I still managed to// fumble around the kitchen preparing spaghetti. If it weren't for// Clyde's well-seasoned suggestions, especially with the spaghetti// sauce, I know I would have goofed. I felt the spaghetti was too soft, but since no one complained to me, I guess most everyone enjoyed the// supper of spaghetti, salad and ice

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cream.

On Saturday, I finally left to//  
go back to Toronto. Before leaving  
I thanked everyone for allowint me/  
to stay, for letting me share in///  
their lives, and for just being////  
themselves and allowing me to be///  
me.

I find it hard to capture or////  
distill the essence of MPA after///  
one week, but I'll try. MPA exists  
and will continue to exist because/  
it reaches out to and welcomes peo-  
ple who have been down and oppres-  
sed by the system. MPA helps such/  
people to become aware of and ex-//  
perience--perhaps for the first////  
time in their lives--what it really  
means to be alive and human, to////  
live together (not merely survive),  
to be themselves, to help one ano-  
ther through heavy crises, to share  
joys, work and struggles together,/  
and to educate the community and///  
the oppressive mental health sys-//  
tem. MPA is a creative and human//  
alternative to the dehumanizing,///  
life-denying mental hospitals and//  
similar institutions.

Living in the West End House was  
one of the most meaningful and mov-  
~~ing~~ adventures in communal living//  
I have ever experienced. I wish I/  
had more time to visit the other 3/  
MPA houses, although on one acca-//  
sion I did briefly rap with Fran///  
and other people in the East End///  
House.

I wish MPA had ten more houses,/  
I wish there was an MPA in every///  
big city in Canada, in the U.S., in  
the world. With a growing netwerd/  
of MPA's, we can do a lot to human-  
ize treatment and living generally/  
in a world where millions of peop//  
ple, both in and out of institu-///  
tions, are still being conned, ex-/  
ploited and oppressed. In other///  
words, I see MPA as a force for hu-  
man liberation. This is what psy-/  
chology and therapy should be about  
but rarely are/

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After the house meeting on Sat-/  
urday, Clyde drove me out to the///  
airport with Dave, Tom, Danny and//  
Norm. I felt down for a while, be-  
cause I was leaving many people I//  
came to like, respect and was close  
to. Yet I also was happy, feeling/  
that some people really cared about  
me and showed it. We said good-bye  
by hugging and holding each other./  
Words were useless.