



LLOYD AND MARGE . . . talking helps to ease the burden

—Ken Oakes Photo

Self-help down on the FUNNI farm helps lighten the big-city load

By ROBERT SARTI
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MATSQUI — Information overload is no laughing matter at the FUNNI Farm.

It's serious when the frantic pace of big city life starts to get you down, and you find you have no close friends and you can't seem to fit into any routine.

It can land you in the psychiatric ward of your local general hospital, or—if you haven't a place like the FUNNI Farm — you might end up in Riverview or another mental institution.

Take Hal: He was a 28-year-old welder in Vancouver when he suffered a nervous breakdown. Into Lions Gate Hospital for six weeks, then group therapy for a month. Not much improvement.

Then his social worker told him about the Mental Patients Association, and the MPA told him about its rural commune, the Foundation for the Understanding of Nervous and Neurotic Illnesses (the FUNNI Farm).

"I knew I had to get away from the city," says Hal. "I was suffering information overload. There was such a tremendous number of things happening — the traffic and the people and the intensity of living — that I had trouble being spontaneous or happy.

"In the city you jump from thing to thing, but you never really have time to go beyond the surface, or to establish deep relationships with people."

In the past five weeks, the FUNNI Farm has given Hal the time he felt he needed.

He goes for walks in the country. He chops wood and is building a chicken coop. He takes his turn with the dishes

and other housework. He does crafts and watches a lot of television.

And — crucial to the MPA method — he has long talks with other people at the farm about himself, about themselves and about the state of the world.

The farm was established in September in this lower Fraser Valley community on a wooded and meadowed tract donated by a local farmer who was once a mental patient. For \$300 a year — the cost of taxes — the MPA has use of a farm house and access to 20 acres of land surrounding it.

Groceries and other living expenses are paid for out of welfare cheques. The MPA, which draws financial support from public and private agencies, helps too.

Right now, there are five people living at the farm. Eventually, there will be about 20.

"A lot of the people, like Hal, who will come to the farm, have never lived in a communal setting," says Lloyd, the farm's only permanent resident.

"They've lived with their own family, or in a room, and so they don't know very much about how to get along with other people, or how other people can help you when you're down.

"The problem is that after you're released from mental hospital, you're generally just dumped out on the street and told 'do your own thing' — which can be very scary.

"That's why there's a two-thirds repeater rate for mental patients. They have no place to go, and they feel hospital is safer than being alone.

"The idea here is to give

the people time to get themselves in shape, so they can make a better try in the city.

"The surroundings here are peaceful, and you get away from the city's head hassles. Out here, the only hassles are between the people in the house."

The MPA method is amateur and self-help. It operates on the theory that ordinary non-professional people, drawing on their own personal experiences, can help other people with similar problems.

"We're not a professional thing," says Lloyd, a 21-year-old whose only experience before joining MPA eight months ago was in running a communal house for young people near Vancouver's city hall.

"We're a friend thing. We're not sitting on a pedestal, and we don't try to put on an act that we're professionals.

"You have to have cracked up to know what it (nervous breakdown) is like, and to be able to help."

MPA was founded a year ago by a couple of ex-mental patients, and its membership now extends to about 250 people — mostly ex-patients, but also a growing number of potential patients.

Its main focus of activity is a sort of half-way house-drop-in centre at 3181 West Tenth in Vancouver. A \$40,764 grant under the federal Local Initiatives Program will permit establishment of another MPA house in the East End.

"We want to prevent people from going into hospital," says MPA director Barry Coull.

"We provide support for people in the community —

sort of crisis work. We deal with housing problems, welfare, legal assistance.

"We are someone to talk to. You know, it's hard for a lot of people to go to their friends and say, 'I'm having hallucinations, and I haven't even been taking drugs,' or 'I have these wild fears my phone is tapped or I'm going to be murdered.' The friends will probably just tell them they're nuts, which is not much help.

"We want to get rid of the stigma that's attached to mental illness. We want to keep people in the community, so they won't be victims of the attitude that says, 'get out of my neighborhood, mental nigger.'"

Despite its unorthodox approach, says Coull, MPA has become accepted by most of the old-line agencies and professionals as a worthwhile and needed service.

"Even in psychiatric hospitals, they're finding that lay people are far more effective as counsellors than are professionals. The lay people get more involved, they give out, they empathize with the patients, they establish a personal rather than a patient relationship.

That's why the FUNNI Farm was convinced of as a way station. A month or so in the country, and then back to the city.

Pretty soon, Hal will be going back — but not to the life he had before.

"I'm going to try to find a house with other people. And I'm going to get a job as a postman. That way, all I'd have to do is walk around and deliver mail, which is a very pleasant thing to do."