

Ex-mental patients take off their masks

By ROBERT SARTI

Molly Dexall, an ex-mental patient who used to put her poems into a drawer as fast as she wrote them, is now a published author with nothing to hide.

Judi Chamberlain used to keep a secret journal of her days in a mental hospital. Now she's writing a book on the mental patients liberation movement.

Patty Servant published her first story under someone else's name because she was sure it had no literary merit. She may still lack total self-confidence but now she's not afraid to sign her work.

All three, along with about 40 other Vancouver ex-mental patients, are out in the open at last in *Madness Unmasked*, an anthology of creative writing published by the non-profit Mental Patients Association.

The poems, stories and essays included in the book tell what it's like to be a mental patient. Selections were based on literary merit as well as on content.

Most of the entries stress the themes that spawned MPA four years ago — especially, how ordinary people can help each other overcome mental and emotional problems where conventional forms of psychiatry have failed.

Or as Molly Dexall puts it: "Psychiatrists don't give us much credit for being able to solve the problem of beating

mental illness. As soon as we realize that hospitals and doctors are not doing the trick, we are on the way to getting well."

One of her entries tells the story of a woman named Mrs. Shaffron who is coaxed out of near-immobility by two sympathetic fellow patients.

In an interview, Mrs. Dexall, 54, told *The Vancouver Sun* that the account of Mrs. Shaffron is in fact disguised autobiography.

"It was patients helping each other," she said. "They pulled me out of it. I wasn't afraid of them because I knew they weren't going to give me shock treatment, like the doctors did."

Mrs. Dexall has been in and out of mental hospital 17 times in the previous 11 years. She had had 123 shock treatments and, by her own estimation, "couldn't put two and two together."

She began writing in earnest a few years ago as an aid to understanding her hospital experiences. But until MPA staff member Stan Persky inveigled her into publishing some of her work in the MPA newspaper *In A Nutshell*, she had kept it hidden.

"I can't burn it or hide it anymore," she said. "Sometimes it's embarrassing, because it's your innermost thoughts, but if I can go in really deep, that to me is a real pleasure.

"This is madness un-



—Dan Scott Photo

PATTY SERVANT, MOLLY DEXALL . . . tell all

masked. We took off our masks and here we are."

Patty Servant, 27, feels she is virtually possessed when she writes — whether it's stories, autobiographical sketches or aphorisms.

"It just comes out of my fingers, like I was having somebody tell me what to write," she said.

"One time I woke up at 4 a.m. because one of the kids had leg cramps. I put him in the bath and then, because there was nothing else to do, I just started to write.

"Around Christmastime I get burned out and depressed. Then I start writing. If it's not good, I just throw it in the garbage."

The first piece she submitted to *In A Nutshell* had a friend's name on it.

"That way, I could go around asking, 'What did you think of so and so's piece?'" and I could get a truthful answer," she said. "I put my name on my stuff now, but most of the time I'm still sure it's no good."

Judi Chamberlain, 30, came out of mental hospital eight years ago. She had started a journal of her hospital experience and continued it afterwards.

Madness Unmasked contains her account of how she learned the tricks of survival from other patients — how she was advised to cry at night when no one was looking, for instance, because if the doctors saw her crying they would diagnose her as sicker than she really was.

"I started my journal with incidents that occurred in hospital," she said. "It was a tool to help me understand what had happened to me, and now it's a tool to help me write articles to help other people understand."

Now she's working on a book on the mental patient liberation movement across North America which will detail how self-help groups such as MPA are battling the medical establishment to decentralize and re-

form the mental health system.

Madness Unmasked, which is available from the MPA at 1902 West Sixth, and will soon be in bookstores, is the first publication of the MPA's Mental Patients Publishing Project. The project has been funded by a variety of federal grants over the past year, but hopes eventually to become fairly self-sustaining.

Due for release within a few days is an *Anti-Psychiatry Bibliography*, the only complete listing of writings, tapes, films and other material on the anti-psychiatry movement, whose best known spokesman is the radical British psychiatric R. D. Laing.

Also in the production stages are a book on gestalt therapy and a quarterly journal of scholarly and lay articles to be entitled *Bedlam*.

"We started the publishing project because there was virtually no other voice in North America in the anti-psychiatry movement," said MPA research director Evelynne Rubin.

"We think there is room for a legitimate small publishing house that may prove to be financially independent and which will provide jobs for some of our people at the same time."