



## **Stand Up For Mental Health:** *A New Organization Uses Comedy to Fight Mental Illness and Public Stigma*

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Eufemia Fantetti grew up surrounded by mental illness. Her mother had paranoid schizophrenia and her father had clinical depression and obsessive compulsive disorder.

As a teenager she herself began to experience all the symptoms of depression, an illness that's had a huge effect on her life. She says, "I have spent most of my life feeling like there was a dark cloud of despair that permeated my presence and ruined every gathering. I felt like I would depress and discourage everyone."

But today the cloud has lifted, and Eufemia

realizes it's time to laugh again. That's what attracted her to Stand Up For Mental Health, a year-long program that teaches stand-up comedy to people with mental illness as a way of building self-esteem and fighting public stigma.

Founded by counsellor and comic David Granirer, Stand Up For Mental Health has a group of comics in Vancouver, and is also offered through the Mood Disorders Association of Ontario in Toronto. Granirer also trains comics in different cities across the country in conjunction with organizations like the Canadian Mental Health Association and

then has them perform at public events and fundraisers. "There's something amazing about having clients from your organization take the stage at an event and rock the house," says Granirer. It's incredibly empowering and a great way of fighting public stigma. Most so-called normal people would never want to do stand up comedy. Seeing people with mental illness do it forces the audience to re-evaluate their perceptions and biases against people who are mentally ill."

Granirer got the idea for Stand Up For Mental Health from watching students in his Langara College Stand-Up Comedy

Clinic course in Vancouver. "Though Stand-Up Comedy Clinic isn't intended as therapy, I've had students overcome long standing depressions and phobias, not to mention increasing their confidence and self-esteem. There's something incredibly healing about telling a roomful of people exactly who you are and having them laugh and cheer. It tends to knock out your shame. All of a sudden you think 'Hey, I'm not so bad after all.'"

Research also points to the value of humor. A study by the U.S. Army found that cadets who used coping humor in basic training were less likely to quit than those who didn't. Another study on Israeli children who'd spent time in bomb shelters found fewer lingering psychological effects among those who'd been billeted with peers who had a viable sense of humor. Granirer adds, "There's something about using

humor in the face of adversity that makes us stronger and more resilient."

Stand Up For Mental Health graduate Norm Conrad bears this out. Upon graduating from high school in 1985, Norm was hospitalized with psychosis and told he'd probably never get out. Though eventually released, Norm was hospitalized several more times.

Today, thanks to Stand Up For Mental Health, Conrad is a changed man. His sense of humor, always one of his strengths is apparent. Referring to his numerous hospital stays he says, "Dad had always told me, 'If you want to accomplish great things in your life, you have to be committed.'"

Stand Up For Mental Health has helped Conrad cope by finding humour in his struggles to regain mental health. "My Doctor told me I could never take Prozac as I might go off and kill someone. Is that really what I'd do

if I cheered up?"

On a more serious note he says, "Succeeding at stand-up comedy has been great for my self-esteem and self confidence. Stand Up For Mental Health has been a life-saver at a time in my life when the waters are stormy."

Another student, Jacquie Johnston says, "Doing this program has improved my self-esteem and confidence. Getting positive feedback from the instructor, the other comics, and the media really helped change the way I feel about myself."

Jacquie continues, "Before the course I had stigma even about admitting I might have a mental illness, but now I'm honoured to belong to such an amazing group of people. I am fully open to and pursuing a diagnosis and treatment. In fact I could see myself becoming an advocate. I'm no longer ashamed to talk about it and am actively promoting the

course to my friends etc."

Stand Up For Mental Health recently did a showcase in Vancouver with Vicki Gabereau as their MC. Gabereau, who's father suffered from depression is a big supporter of the program. CBC's the Passionate Eye is filming a documentary where the producers are following the 2005 Vancouver class for a whole year.

Perhaps the last word on Stand Up For Mental Health goes to 2005 Vancouver class member Roxanne Teale. "This comedy thing is a lot of fun," she says. "I'm going to use it instead of food as a replacement for sex. So I sure hope I get to perform a lot."

*Counsellor and stand up comic David Granirer leads Stand Up For Mental Health, a program teaching stand up comedy to people with mental illness as a way of building confidence and fighting stigma. For more information call (604)*

*205-9242 or go to <http://www.standupformentalhealth.com>*

*For information about David's humor in the workplace presentations go to: [www.psychocomic.com](http://www.psychocomic.com)*