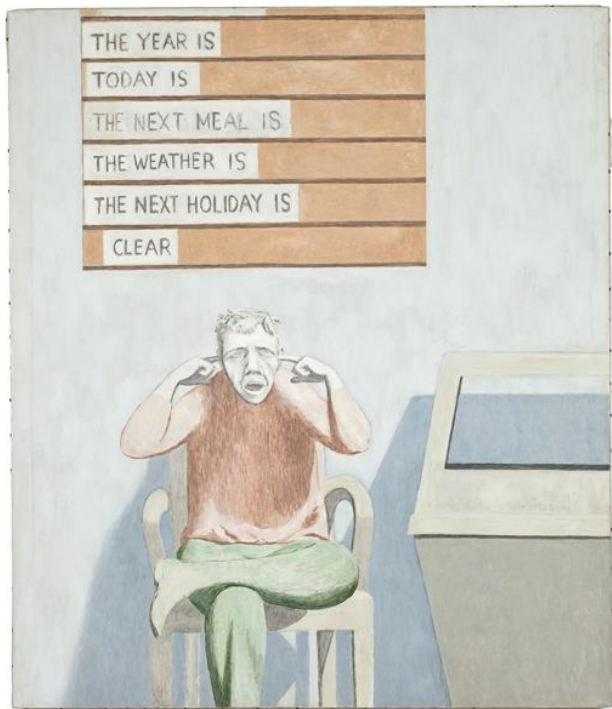


Conference to shine light on mental illness

By Jessica Reynolds Staff Writer

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Featured artist David Byrd's painting, called "Patient Hearing Voices," is one of the artist's pieces that will be on display at the Roxbury Arts Center from Saturday until Feb. 21.

Area mental health advocates and those who have struggled with mental illness are teaming up to host a free all-day conference this month to encourage a community conversation on the topic, organizers said Monday.

The event, called Hope & Healing: Perspectives on Mental Illness, is scheduled to take place on Saturday from 9:30 a.m. until 3 p.m. at the Roxbury Arts Center, and will feature keynote speakers, round table discussions, and an art exhibit and music focused on mental health advocacy, recovery and services, according to Jessica Farrell, conference coordinator.

The program is being put on by local chapters of the National Alliance on Mental Illness, Delaware County NY Connects, the Roxbury Arts Group and the David Byrd Estate, Farrell said.

Community response to the event has been overwhelming, according to Farrell, who said Sunday that the Roxbury Arts Center has reached its room capacity for the event. Organizers are grateful for the interest and feel the response speaks to the abundance of mental health issues locally, she added.

“The need is just so great in our community,” Farrell said. “Almost every person I talk to about this says, ‘Oh, my sister has Schizophrenia’ or ‘My uncle has Bipolar disorder.’”

The accessibility issues in rural America, shortage of services and stigmas surrounding mental illness deeply affect people in rural communities, Farrell said. It can be hard to know where to turn, she said.

Events like the Hope & Healing Conference offer hope because it’s “inspiring to hear stories of people coming through dark times and coming out the other end,” Farrell added.

One of these stories is of David Byrd, an artist who lived in Sidney Center who Farrell met while working on a project, she said. Because both Farrell and Byrd had mental illness in their families, they had an immediate connection. Soon, Farrell got to know Byrd better and learned that he was a talented artist with a haunting past.

Byrd’s father suffered with mental illness and committed suicide when Byrd was young. His mother left home when Byrd was 12, Farrell said. Later in life, Byrd worked for 30 years as an orderly in the psychiatric ward at the VA Hospital in Montrose, caring for veterans with a variety of mental disorders, Farrell explained.

These experiences inspired Byrd to write a book and create artwork focusing on mental illness, Farrell said. Although Byrd has since died, his artwork will be on display in the Roxbury Arts Center’s gallery during the conference and until Feb. 21.

“Having known David, I feel that the conference is a way to honor him and his legacy,” Farrell said. “He was an advocate.”

One of the speakers at the conference will be Kate Hewlett, a peer specialist at Otsego County Rehabilitation Support Services and a member of Otsego County’s NAMI.

Hewlett was once told by a physician that she would never attend college, hold a steady job or be in a relationship because of her mental illness. But, because of determination and help from outside sources, Hewlett was recently hired as the first Peer Engagement Specialist for Otsego County’s RSS, she said.

At the conference, Hewlett will speak about her “dark days” and “rocky road to recovery,” focusing on the fact that “there is hope, healing and recovery,” she said.

“This is the first event of this kind around here that I’ve been part of,” Hewlett said. “I’m really excited, especially for the round table discussions, when people will be able to comment and ask questions.”

A complimentary breakfast and lunch for participants will be catered by the Tulip & Rose Cafe in Franklin, Farrell said.

Other speakers will include a local songwriter singing about her family’s struggles with mental illness; Otsego County and Delaware County NAMI board members and coordinators, who will speak on a broad array of topics including support for family members, elderly people and local resources; local service providers who will have literature and information; Jason Paden, a member of Schoharie County RSS who will share his own inspiring story of recovery; and representatives of the 24/7 Mobile Crisis Assessment Team, which was recently established to help identify mental health needs and provide early intervention to decrease the number of crisis cases.

More than 25 percent of Americans have a mental illness and 78 percent have symptoms of one, according to the Centers for Disease Control. However, mental illness is sometimes stigmatized because not everyone understands what it is or what it feels like, Farrell said.

Farrell said looking at Byrd's art may help others better understand those who suffer with mental illnesses.

"Initially, (the art) was hard to look at because I know many people who've been there," Farrell said. "But then you get this real sense of empathy. I think that is what David felt himself after losing his father to suicide and then working with these veterans."

Many different people would benefit from the conference, Farrell said, including family members who are struggling with loved ones' disorders, social workers, psychologists, therapists, individuals who struggle themselves, creative people who would enjoy the artwork and "anyone struggling in life," Farrell said.

Farrell said she hopes the event will encourage more partnerships among community groups and create connections between artists of all different kinds. A theater piece centered on the topic of mental illness and Byrd is in talks for the summer of 2015, she said.

More than anything, Farrell said, she hopes to encourage empathy, which "goes a long way."

"If people can maybe understand the people suffering in their own lives better, they might be more inclined to help others and understand that there are positive ways to intervene, rather than just telling a depressed person 'Oh, just get a job.' Sometimes it's not a quick fix."

The in-depth discussions that will hopefully happen at the conference will also help service providers and caregivers know how to improve support, Farrell said.

"We're going to learn," Farrell said, "how to make services better."