Profile: Disabled People Are Still People

Everyone in the world faces adversities, some hardships are self-inflicted, and others are hardships people are born with. However, there are programs put in place to help people with these types of problems, but what happens when your hardship is a mental disability? People with mental health disabilities carry a negative stigma and often are pushed aside. According to Stefania Mannarino and Alessandro Rossi, the authors of Assessing Mental Illness Stigma: A Complex Issue. “Globally more than 70% of the people with mental illness get no treatment from health care staff.” Because of these types of stigmas, the community and health decision-makers see people with cognitive issues with “low regard”, as Norman Sartorius puts it. He believes that this type of mindset makes health care professionals and the government unwilling to invest resources into mental health care. Causing a domino effect among mental health facilities. Where the staff do the bare minimum to help these people and do just enough to say they have done their job.

The staff in several health care facilities are not as caring and supportive as they should be because they have already marked people with these disabilities. Often you hear reports about abuse in mental care facilities. According to a survey of patients in mental hospitals in the United States, taken by Michael Simonson. Only 17% out of 500 respondents said they were satisfied with the “quality of psychiatric treatment” they received. While Thirty-seven percent said they were physically abused in some way (with forced treatment included as an example of physical abuse). Since there is a negative assumption on people who have mental illness and there are many horror stories, the people who suffer from this are hesitant to ask for help. They automatically expect discrimination from people. They don’t know where to go to get access to treatment and don’t know enough about their disability to know that there is help for them.

Nevertheless, it does not have to be this way, there are some places like the Foundation for Independent Living, a community-based program for adults with cognitive incapacities and developmental delays. That is genuine and wants to help people with cognitive incapability succeed. At Foundation for Independent Living, their goal is to teach people to be independent, how to interact with others, and create and maintain friendships. They strive to be kind, caring, and trustworthy.

When I entered the facility, I was amazed at how nice it was. There was a common area, a game room, a music room that held a piano guitar, and a plethora of other instruments. They also had an art a crafts room that was filled with hundreds of art supplies. It was sparkly clean and was somewhat cozy like a home. It was obvious this office was maintained daily and done with care.

In so many ways, caregivers like Andrea and the rest of the staff at Foundation for Independent Living are hard to come by. Andrea is destined to care, and it shows. She truly has a gift when it comes to caregiving and it helps her to be able to see beyond a diagnosis. She treated the residents like normal people, without a disability. She treated everyone the same regardless of how severe their disability is.

After 15 years of working at Foundation for Independent Living as a caregiver, Andrea was like

the office celebrity. “Andrea, you’re finally back!” a resident says. “Hi Michelle, I heard about your new job training, I am so excited for you!” Andrea yells back. I watched her as she hugged every resident as she walked through the common area to start her shift. It was like she was a superhero coming to save the day, everyone was happy to see her. Her kindness was contagious because all the staff had the same demeanor as her.

When it was time for the medicine to be distributed, she asked all the residents how their morning was and their plans for the day. She uplifted everyone saying things like “You got it!” “Don’t worry the job is yours.” “Don’t be afraid to ask for help, I’m here for you!” Things a lot of these residents needed to hear because most of their family was far away.

By Noon, most of the residents were off to work or to vocational job training the program provided for residents that were not working. The goal was to ensure that everyone was kept busy and productive. Before sitting with me, she walked around to the remaining residents in the office, “Tommy, what can I do to make this day better for you?” she asked one of the residents. After her rounds, she finally sat next to me. She had a look of gratitude spread across her face.

“Seems like this is something you enjoy doing, is this position rewarding to you?” I asked her. “Yes, it is a rewarding job for me. I genuinely enjoy helping these residents. Being there when they get their first job, watching them grow, and learn how to do new things on their own is very satisfying. They need us, they trust that we will be there for them. And when you get to know them, regardless of their disabilities, they are all sweet people. The program also treats the residents to cruises, which means the staff is required to go, and that’s always a plus for me.” she said, laughing.

“A lot of times there are bad stigmas on these types of programs. Some people think that these programs are money-hungry and aren’t really in it to help people. Some parents refuse to let their kids’ participate in this kind of system because they fear abuse and mistreatment. Do you agree with those stigmas and is that the case for this program?” I asked. She sighed, “I believe that before you do anything you need to do your research. These types of programs are no different. You need to get a feel for the people that work there and look for any red flags. Set up a visit before you commit to anything and talk to the people that are a part of the program. Foundation for Independent Living has a staff that wants to see the residents win. We listen to the residents and their concerns about staff members. Our main concern is their success and how they feel. So, if the majority are not happy with a staff member, we do our best to ensure those feelings change. We have no tolerance for any abuse here and the no mistreatment rule is implemented here. But, we haven’t had any abuse encounters or complaints from the residents.”

Everything she said about the program was positive and I was curious to see if there were any negative aspects to this job. I wanted to see if there was a balance of pros and cons and how severe the cons were. Not wanting to offend any of the other employees in the office, I whispered, “What are the downsides to working here?” “The downsides would be when one of the residents passes away. Or when their parents pull them out of the program due to personal reasons. Everyone here is like a big family, so when we lose someone it takes some adjusting for everyone.” She expressed.

Even though there is a negative stigma on Health Care facilities for the mentally disabled.

Places like Foundation for Independent Living are the perfect programs to turn this stigma around. This is a place that truly has a heart for people with these incapacities and sincerely wants to help. Pessimistic stigmas should not prevent people from attaining the help they need. If more light was given to programs like this, more people would be willing to seek him for themselves and their family members. People with these disabilities are not bad people and they deserve to be treated fairly and equally. The mistreatment some people encounter because of their disability can be turned around if more systems are put in place to help them. A person like Andrea and a program like Foundation for Independent Living proves that there are options if the research is done.