

## The 2016 Alternatives Conference: 30 Years, Looking Back, Looking Forward

By M.C. Harris, LACDMH Community Worker TAY-SOC



The 2016 Alternatives Conference – which took place in San Diego from Sept. 19 to 23, 2016 – was one of the best Peer/Consumer Conferences that I have been to in a while. The five-day event began with a drum performance from the Native American tribe and opening remarks delivered from Paolo Del Vecchio, M.S.W., Director of the Substance Abuse Mental Health Service Administration’s Center for Mental Health Services (SAMHSA/CMHS). He touched on an earlier time when the Alternatives Conference was geared towards SAMHSA alignment with mental health treatment and how far they have come towards wellness and recovery best practices with clients/consumers using a variety of treatment approaches.

This was followed by a film showing the past and the present movement of mental health civil rights, featuring the new National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C.

And after Del Vecchio’s opening remarks, a panel of those pioneers who came before us discussed the history of advocacy. The panel included Sally Ziman, one of the conference’s keynote speakers and Executive Director of California Association of Mental Health Peer Run Organizations (CAMHPRO); Mike Finkle, the Executive Director of On Our Own of Maryland, Inc., a statewide mental health consumer



advocacy and education organization representing 24 peer-operated Wellness and Recovery centers around Maryland; and Paolo Del Vecchio.

The next evening we had an award banquet, which recognized the individuals below for their awareness-raising efforts.

Five individuals receive distinct awards of advocacy. Left to Right: Rita Cisneros, an advocate for mental-health awareness in the LGBT community, died May 25, 2016 at Harrisburg Hospital of cancer. She was 62. And someone else stood in to receive The Cookie Grant and Bill Compton LGBT Leadership Award, Mr. Michael Ortega HOWIE THE HARP ARTS AWARD, Senobia Pichardo Esperanza Hope Memorial Award, Neeko Veargis Youth & Young Adult Peer Leadership Award, and Sally Zinman 1<sup>st</sup> and former Life Time Achievements presented the, Life Time Advocacy Award to Shery Mead.

Our Southern California regional caucus meeting had over 50 individuals in a circle group setting. There were more than 50 workshops, with topics such as: depression, schizophrenia, suicide prevention, recovery and empowerment, how to start a grassroots advocacy campaign, how to create media, emotional CPR, mental health research, and Transitional Age Youth (TAY) groups.

One workshop that really impressed me was presented by the peer-run organization Join Rise Be in Connecticut, who did a recovery initiative that raised the age limit for TAY from 25 to 29.

We also had a talent night and an evening dance, plus there was a socialization room with arts and crafts where you could relax and play games.

Below are personal notes on the 2016 Alternatives Conference:



**Jim "The Hat," Service Area 5** "Very unified in providing suicide prevention answers and tips for family relationships. The hotel and food were very good. It was a happy and transformative time."

**Ja'Vette, Service Area 6** "The trip was awesome--full of good information." She learned that a lot of youth are involved and enjoyed the workshop on emotional CPR. My stay was very comfortable, relaxing, and educational."



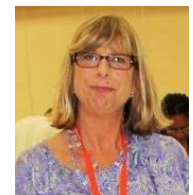
**Jason from West L.A. SHARE!** "It's always great to be around a community that's learning and sharing research, information and best practices."

**Rosalie of DMH South Bay** "The first day I enjoyed the icebreaker games. It put most of us into a relaxed frame of mind to mingle. It was an innovative way to help people that oftentimes feel somewhat anxious or uncomfortable when out of their usual environment and surrounded by a crowd of new people with different languages, traditions, and cultures."



**Michelle NAMI Urban L.A.** "It was wonderful being around my peers from all around the world. We shared and inspired each other. And the youth really inspired me with their passion, determination and commitment. I enjoyed the workshops and documentaries. An experience I'll never forget."

**Karun of CAMPRO** "I found tools brought from across the country that provided different perspectives and of alternative ways of advocacy."



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**Mayra DMH South Bay** “The presentation on the history of the movement and meeting some of the pioneers was very exciting. Listening to the stories of the young consumers, who are starting a youth movement, was touching. They shared experiences of multiple hospitalizations and suicide attempts in order to help peers going through similar challenges.”

If you think that this conference will be helpful for a peer consumer, feel free to sponsor someone from your agency or client run-center for the next Alternatives conference. For more information on upcoming SAMHSA conferences, visit their site at <http://www.samhsa.gov/capt/news-announcements/conferences-trainings>.