

Paul Barry: Making Recovery Work

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Does anyone remember years ago when the preferred choice for mental health treatment shifted from consumers being told what to do by a clinician (Medical Model) to creating a service environment where consumers have input over decisions about their own care (Recovery Model)? And, nationwide, many pointed to Mental Health America's (MHA) Village in Long Beach as a model for how well the "Recovery Model" was working? It was happening for good reasons; the MHA Village was focusing on person-centered treatment and was recognized by two presidential administrations for exemplifying best employment practices for people with psychiatric disabilities.

Paul Barry, nationally recognized in the Recovery community and former Executive Director of MHA Village, worked at the Village from 1991-2015. Barry specialized in making employment part of recovery. Recently, I caught up with him to discuss his career and achievements in recovery.

Barry defined the Recovery Model this way: **"The Recovery Model requires a focus on the individual and not the illness. It asks that professionals help the person identify and help create a life which is not defined by the illness. It often means paying attention to housing, family, employment or school in addition to traditional counseling and medication. In a recovery model, services center on what an individual needs and not just on what the provider has to offer."**

Barry grew up in Connecticut, close to Boston and studied Urban Education. His first job was working at an inner-city, maximum security prison. In that job, he learned something invaluable—that people often become what others expect of them. With the prisoners, he clearly saw that their futures had been defined by what others expected of them—when given negative labels, they became limited by that identity. Later when working at MHA Village, he found this to be even truer for those with mental illness; if people were defined or labeled by their diagnosis, it often became a confining factor in their future.

After working five years in the prison, Barry moved to California and worked with the developmentally disabled. He created a business called the Hot Dog Building Company in Pasadena, operated by consumers—the first of its kind. He expected employees to be good at their jobs, but they surprised him and went beyond his expectations.

“The results of having clients perform actual work were astounding—overall behaviors changed. Employees became who they wanted to be; they became their better selves.”

In 1985, Barry moved to Portals (Mid-Wilshire District), to focus on employment and business development. Recreating the consumer-operated business model he'd used in Pasadena, he employed (and paid) clients to make and sell cookies at a shop called “The Corporate Cookie,” putting 16-18 people to work each day. He saw clients recognize a change in themselves--realizing the possibility that their illness did not have to define their day-to-day lives.

In 1991, Barry served as Director of Employment at MHA Village in Long Beach, and was responsible for creating paid work experience opportunities at two agency-owned competitive businesses, Deli 456 and The Village Cookie Shoppe. All paid clerical and maintenance crews consisted of members with lived experience. He served as Executive Director at MHA Village until last fall, 2015.

Barry believes that the key for those with mental illness is to identify other roles in their life. **“When clients can recognize other roles for themselves, such as mother, sister, daughter, student, advocate, worker, it makes their illness much smaller and ultimately less powerful.”** He used an analogy of a pie cut into many pieces, each piece representing roles we play; if mental illness is only a small piece of the pie, a diagnosis is ultimately less powerful because it has to share identities with many others.

“The Village was created to achieve actual quality of life outcomes to replace the measuring of effort/hours invested by staff. Did our time spent as professionals make a functional difference? Can we track outcomes, measure them and therefore target them?”

Barry believes that we are all more than our nationality, race, gender and history. This is most importantly true for people in recovery from mental illness. “The way people with mental illness are served is a civil rights issue. Individuals are more than their disability and no one should be more committed to that concept than those paid to help them.”

Barry has some favorite sayings from his years as MHA Village Executive Director that mention repeating:

- In addition to being a skilled clinician, do what it takes to support whole-person recovery.
- Beware of the soft bigotry of low expectations.
- A diagnosis is not a prognosis.
- Encourage consumers to develop an array of non-disabled roles, such as student, advocate or worker.

In addition to recovery, Barry loves horse racing, New England and, many years ago, won the most money ever awarded to a guy (up to that point) on the NBC quiz show *Mind Readers*. When he was 19, he studied abroad in Austria and traveled to Czechoslovakia and East Germany, then behind the iron curtain.