

## TMHA in the News

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The following article was posted on May 5<sup>th</sup>, 2010, in the *The San Luis Obispo Tribune*

### **Opening Minds art show: A space to showcase and enlighten**

By Julie Lynem

Eleven years ago, artist John Byers was diagnosed with bipolar disorder, a mental health condition that left him feeling lost and isolated.

Over time, through outreach and special programs offered by the Transitions-Mental Health Association, Byers discovered he did not have to be defined by his illness and that he could recover from the disorder.

“For a long time, I thought I was the problem,” he said. “I could not see the forest for the trees.”

Now, Byers is giving hope to those living with mental illness, their families and friends by showcasing a trio of his vibrant watercolor paintings at the Opening Minds art show, debuting today in San Luis Obispo.

Byers’ three paintings — “In the Beginning,” “Celestial Angel” and “Bouquet” — were chosen as the featured works for the show, established by the association in 1995 to provide a space for people with mental illness to share their thoughts and talents with the public.

Sharing these experiences and getting to know others in the community with mental illness is one way to educate people and lessen the shame often associated with it, Byers said.

“When you keep it behind closed doors, everyone hurts because of that,” he said.

### **Helping thousands**

Thousands of people like Byers are receiving the assistance they need to live healthy and productive lives because of the county’s mental health professionals and local residents who support a variety of programs.

This year’s Opening Minds show is presented by Transitions, a nonprofit operating 27 programs at more than 35 locations in San Luis Obispo and Santa Barbara counties, the county’s Behavioral Health Services and Copeland Properties. It is funded by the Mental Health Services Act — also known as Proposition 63 — passed in November 2004. As a result of its passage, people living with mental illness have been able to get treatment, attend school, and find jobs and housing.

Since the act’s adoption, more than 7,000 county residents have benefited from mental health services. In addition to the art show, taxpayer dollars have allowed mental health advocates to expand their work in the county’s schools, talking to students and educators about early prevention and intervention and reducing the stigma of mental illness. The focus is also on the

community at large, reaching out to more families who are having difficulty navigating the often complex mental health system.

As well, scholarships have been made available for anyone interested in pursuing an associate's or bachelor's degree in the behavioral health field, and ultimately, working for the county.

The funding was also instrumental in the 2008 formation of the association coordinated Peer Advisory and Advocacy Team, consisting of 20 to 25 local residents, many of whom have benefited from the county's mental health services.

Byers serves as a mental health advocate for the team, leading inpatient support groups at the county's Psychiatric Health Facility.

And this year, the funding helped Transitions to set up a phone line, 1-800-549-4499, dedicated to help people in crisis or in need of mental health referrals. The line is separate from the 211 Hotline, which answers general information calls from those seeking social service assistance.

### **Key support**

However, the funding from the Mental Health Services Act only goes so far, said Barry Johnson, a director at Transitions Mental Health Association.

"We're just skimming the surface," he said.

The majority of the funding for Transitions comes from contracts with the state, federal and local government agencies. Only a small percentage is derived from grants or revenues generated from its businesses, such as the Growing Grounds retail store.

"It's been challenging," Johnson added. "We've had to be creative and really work to stay competitive when the whole economy is drying up. Hopefully, we will be seeing signs of recovery."

It's only through the community efforts and programs for those with mental illnesses and their advocates that true healing and recovery can begin, Byers said.

Byers, a thoughtful and eloquent man who started painting as a child, said it's about planting the seeds of recovery and giving people the care they need to help them reach their full potential.

As for Byers, he's taking it one day at a time, working on his paintings and a book.

"Each journey starts with a single step," he said.

### **Opening Minds art show**

John Byers' watercolors and more than 100 works will be displayed at the Opening Minds show, which begins today and runs through May 23 at 1110 Morro St. in San Luis Obispo.

A reception is set from 3 to 6 p.m. today on the patio at Growing Grounds, 956 Chorro St. in San Luis Obispo.

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