



Recovering Together

Welcome to *Recovering Together*, a quarterly newsletter focused on self-help, mental health and recovery and wellness. *Recovering Together* is for individuals, groups and communities from culturally diverse backgrounds who are involved in mental health consumer and consumer-supporter work.

Diversity, Wellness and Community: Talking with STAR Center Consultants

The STAR Center is fortunate to call Mertice “Gitane” Williams, John Aldam and Can Truong collaborators who work with the STAR Center as consultants in furthering the STAR Center’s work with and for underserved communities. Each possesses insights and skills derived from experience in navigating complex systems and wisdom born from personal challenge and success. We asked these inspirational “stars” about their experiences and outlooks.

★ Mertice “Gitane” Williams

How has mental illness touched your life?

My level of awareness about being perceived by some as not well has weaved many threads of the nature of mental illness in my life. My life’s purpose has come from my healing path of trauma, maintaining a spiritual life and through discovery and creating a wellness lifestyle, or what I call my “Wellness Culture.”



This learning has helped me understand how peer support, hope, and meaningful roles play an important part in my wellness. The art of being different allowed me to share and give care to myself and others. It has been a process of releasing my pain of being different and has been an evolution to discover how my state of mind and perceptions has become an asset in my life. My history-culture of growing up within my family has gifted me with lessons learned about the human condition, and has allowed me to reconcile with being a spiritual being teaching me to love and have compassion for myself and others.

How does cultural competence and diversity show up in your life?

Culture is a very interesting concept and I have found it to be for me a kind of social programming from early childhood that required some unlearning and adaptation after long periods of meditation and prayer. For example, I examined how modeling behaviors presented to me were limited to expressions of sexism or inflexible role expectations, like being a nurturer/caregiver, a role that was expected but was also denigrated and devalued.

Being labeled differently all my life by family members, friends and educators led me to my exploration. Life appeared to include conflicts between me and others. I wondered why I did not feel a sense of belonging to my own world. These are some of the questions I asked myself. How could I find a meaningful role in this world? What kind of vocation or career would work for me? What workplace, housing, or community do I feel safe and welcomed in?

My own path with diversity consisted of accepting and celebrating who I am, which has resulted in a growth process that has included the acceptance of my spiritual life as a core for allowing diversity. I am a multicultural being with lots of diverse aspects within me that connect to all my family ancestors.

What excites you about STAR Center work?

I love working with the STAR Center staff and other consultants. It is the team spirit, that “we are in community together.” We get to celebrate our differences and still be in community with so many other people, cultures, and provide a great service on a national level. It is important for me to be in relationship while sharing information and networking with others. I have found the STAR Center to be inclusive, caring and supportive while passing on valuable information and resources. There are many groups who say that they are inclusive of diversity and they are not. What I appreciate about the STAR Center is that staff and consultants reach out and connect on a heart and soul level. We have to produce more access for people to share with each other in a multicultural matrix. For me, life is a blessing and I feel blessed to have found all of the people in my life. It is with great joy and appreciation for the support, networking, and mutual peer collaboration for being apart of a great collaborative team. I feel welcome and experience a sense of belonging—this is cultural competence in the highest form. Cultural transformation is happening here, where we see everyone as a star! ★

★ John Aldam

1. How has mental illness affected your life?

Mental illness has affected my life dramatically. Depression, alcoholism and violence were predominant in my early upbringing forcing me to leave home at an early age. The stigma of talking about why I left home was tremendous so I adapted with a code of silence about it to fit in.



In my adult life the impact of my childhood affected me in many ways: some positive and others very negative. Depression and anxiety have followed me much of my life. I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder and PTSD. Being part of the recovery movement and doing the advocacy work that I have been doing has led me back to a more balanced, content and purpose-driven life.

2. How does Cultural Competence and diversity show up in your life?

I have lived all over the country at different points in my life and experienced many different cultures. At a young age, I was sent to live with multiple families from many walks of life, race, color, age and creed. When I was in my twenties I met my biological father and brothers and sisters for the first time. They are Native American and they later shared my lost heritage and traditions with me. This has given me the opportunity to reclaim a part of me that had been lost. Doing this work has allowed me to meet so many different people from so many different walks of life. It has enriched my life and enhanced my recovery more than I would ever have thought possible. I have traveled more than I dreamed possible and have met and learned from some incredible people along the way. I continue to learn from the people I meet.

3. What excited me about STAR Center Work?

Working with the STAR Center excites me every time I meet somebody who shares an incredible story. I have the opportunity to support people who think outside the box about their recovery. We spread the message that people can not only survive, but thrive. There is a real sense of community. People are doing incredible things and leading amazing lives. The people I meet and the people I work with keep hope alive. With hope all things are possible. ★

★ Can Truong

1. How has mental illness touched your life?

Mental illness has affected me greatly as I was diagnosed with depression in my high school and college years, then with bipolar disorder, PTSD, anxiety and other mental health challenges. Back then, I wasn't exposed to recovery principles, and ended up with six hospitalizations, 15 ECT sessions and one suicide



attempt. I didn't realize that many of my mental health challenges were the result of discrimination and trauma from childhood years. By participating in the consumer and mental health movements, I was able to learn about recovery and start a path to wholeness. I have been hospital-free for over 10 years now.

2. How does cultural competence and diversity show up in your life?

I grew up in America trying to fit in and following a traditional medical model of mental health care which actually resulted in my not receiving the best care because of the many medical providers who did not practice cultural competence. I was over-medicated by some psychiatrists who didn't understand how the same medications can act very differently in underserved communities. My therapist didn't understand Asian American mental health needs. Through consumer empowerment work, I believe in listening to cultural perspectives and cultural healing approaches. By reconnecting to my Asian American roots of creating balance and harmony using holistic modalities such as acupuncture, energy healing, being with nature and mindfulness meditation, I was able to be whole again and follow the healing journey.

3. What excites you about STAR Center work?

I have a passion to share information and provide technical assistance to diverse communities and also to hear about different perspectives from my fellow peers on a recovery path. By being connected, we can empower our communities to heal and to help shape and then access the services we need. Taking part in STAR Center work can facilitate sharing information, helping to connect to resources, and help connect people to each other in ways that foster hope, help generate new possibilities and demonstrate that recovery is possible. Each one of us can have a meaningful, connected and rewarding life. ★

Upcoming Events

June 9 – 12, 2010: Mental Health America's 2010 Annual Conference Get Connected: Social Inclusion in Wellness and Recovery will be held in Washington, D.C. For more information, please visit www.mentalhealthamerica.net/go/conference2010.

June 30 – July 3, 2010: The NAMI National Convention will be held in Washington, D.C. For information and to register, please visit: www.nami.org or call (703) 524-7600.

July: National Minority Mental Health Awareness Month

Recovery and Wellness Toolbox: The Four Agreements

This regular feature presents books, CDs, websites, self-help practices, tools and products that can be used to enhance or continue recovery, mental health and wellness or help strengthen organizational effectiveness.

In the book *The Four Agreements*, author don Miguel Ruiz talks about four principles to put into practice for every day life. He states that applying these principles or “agreements” consistently can be very difficult and can be, more importantly, a way to dramatically change your life for the better.

How? *The Four Agreements* presents a view of how some particular thoughts can either cause us suffering or support our peace and well being.

According to the author, developing a sense of personal awareness, connected to moment-by-moment application of these agreements, could enable us to experience greater power in more consciously shaping ourselves and our reaction patterns with people and events.

The Four Agreements are:

1. Be Impeccable with your Word

Speak with integrity. Say only what you mean. Avoid using words to speak against yourself or to gossip about others. Use the power of your word in the direction of truth and love.

2. Don't Take Anything Personally

Nothing others do is because of you. What others say and do is a projection of their own reality, their own dream. (As is yours.) When you are immune to the opinions and actions of others, you won't be the victim of needless suffering.

3. Don't Make Assumptions

Find the courage to ask questions and to express what you really want. Communicate with others as clearly as you can to avoid misunderstandings, and unnecessary sadness and destructive drama. With just this one agreement, you can completely transform your life.

4. Always Do Your Best

Your best is going to change from moment to moment. Your best could be different when you are healthy as opposed to when you might be sick or not feeling well. Under any circumstance, simply do your best, and you will avoid self-judgment, self-abuse, and regret. Learning from previous experiences can build on strengths.

As you practice living these, your life will dramatically change. In the beginning these new habits will be challenging and you will lapse countless times. With practice these agreements become integrated into your being and every area of your life and become easy habits to keep.

Source: www.toltecspirit.com

For free audio downloads on self-mastery, see:
<http://pathwaytohappiness.com/insights.htm>

Communities Corner: National Resources and Information

African American Community

Black Voices: Afro-Americans and AIDS
www.bvwellness.com/2010/02/06/black-americans-are-greater-than-aids/

Asian and Pacific Islander Community

The Hmong
<http://hmongmentalhealth.com/>

Southeast Asian Outreach and Kajsiah House
www.mhcdc.org/Services/KHSEA.html

American Indian and Native Alaskan Communities

Medline Plus
www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/nativeamericanhealth.html

Tribal Connections
www.tribalconnections.org/ehealthinfo/mentalhealth.html

Latino Community

National Latino Behavioral Health Association
www.nlbha.org/

National Alliance for Hispanic Health
www.hispanichealth.org/

Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning & Intersex Community

The National Coalition for LGBT Health has moved to a new website
<http://www.lgbthealth.net/stage/>

Youth Community

SAMHSA Resources for Children's Mental Health
<http://mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/child/childhealth.asp>

NAMI Child and Adolescent Action Center
www.nami.org/caac Phone: (703) 524-7600

Women

The National Women's Health Information Center
www.womenshealth.gov/mental-health/

Student Community

A Better Life Through Community
www.strengthofus.org/

Military Veterans Community

National Coalition for Homeless Veterans
www.nchv.org/background.cfm

NAMI Veterans Resources
www.nami.org

Elder/Senior Community

The Greater Lowell Elder Mental Health Collaborative
www.eldermentalhealth.org/

General/National

SAMHSA Mental Health Services Locator
www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/databases



Dimensions of Diversity

Ethnic heritage	Income
Mental/physical abilities and characteristics	Work experience
Race	Military experience
Sexual orientation	Geographic location
Age	Education
Gender	Work style
First language	Family status
Religious/nonreligious beliefs	Communication style
	Organizational role and level

from *Implementing Diversity*, by Marilyn Loden

About the STAR Center/National Consumer/Consumer-Supporter Technical Assistance Centers

The STAR Center, a consumer-supporter technical assistance center, promotes mental health recovery by providing consultation, technical assistance and information resources and referrals to enhance self-help in diverse communities.

The National Consumer/Consumer-Supporter Technical Assistance Centers (STAR Center and those listed below), are funded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), Center for Mental Health Services, and were established to provide mental health consumers and their supporters with skills necessary to foster self-help/self-management approaches and to assist with the improvement of state- and local-level mental health service systems and practices.

National Consumer Supporter Technical Assistance Center

Mental Health America
2000 N. Beauregard Street, 6th Floor
Alexandria, Va. 22311
Phone: (800) 969-6642
www.ncstac.org

National Empowerment Center

599 Canal Street
Lawrence, Mass. 01840
Phone: (800) 769-3728
www.power2u.org

National Mental Health Consumers' Self-Help Clearinghouse

1211 Chestnut Street, Suite 1207
Philadelphia 19107
Phone: (800) 553-4539
www.mhselfhelp.org

Coming Soon!

Cultural Competency in Mental Health:
*A Tool to Assess and Enhance
Your Peer-run Programs and
Self-help Groups*

Please visit the STAR Center website for online audio and written materials on recovery, self-determination and cultural wellness at www.consumerstar.org.



STAR Center

NAMI

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<http://mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/cmhs>

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