



Welcome to the 2015 Clubhouse International World Seminar

David Koven, Frontier House, Colorado

Thank you friends!

Let me take a brief few moments here and thank some people before I get too wrapped up in myself. I am so grateful to be here. Truly, I am so humbled so let me just get these deserving acknowledgements out of the way.

I have to begin by thanking Clubhouse International for inviting me to participate in this 2015 world seminar. When I first learned of this from Russell, a Clubhouse worker at my Clubhouse, I was emotional, very grateful and humbled. I had to refrain from busting out in tears all over the Frontier House dining room. I also want to thank my Clubhouse Director, Renee Schell, and the Frontier House staff for their consideration that brought me to be standing before you today with this honor of addressing a global audience. WOW!

They see something in me when I am not always seeing it in myself, things way bigger than what I'm thinking about. I thank Renee and the staff and my fellow members for a lot more than all of that, and some of you know exactly what I am talking about. There is no description for the support received. I know without the Frontier House, I would not be standing here right now, this far, this fast!

What an honor it is to be here! ... The best way to describe how I feel right now at this moment is ... YAYAA!!! ---- Are you with me? Are any of you as excited as I am right now about these next 5-days? .... I want you all to know that I am stable at the moment, even if it didn't sound like it, but it's good to know if I do have a breakdown up here, at least I'm in the right place, right? There is a lot of support and recovery in this room. Amen!

Well, if you did not catch it, my name is David Koven. To start, please hear me say to you that I am not anything special. I am not paid to be here. I don't do this for a living. If you saw my life just 10-months ago, you would realize you are watching something divine and supernatural because that's how far I've come from then to now. I don't have degrees in Mental or Behavioral health. I do not work in the mental health field unless being a volunteer member driver for Frontier House counts. I am not an expert even though I may in fact be an expert, but only through my own experience

and choices I make to learn about my own condition and learn by fellowship with others. What I am is nothing more than many of you. I am simply a Clubhouse member, one with current active and often intense unresolved issues, and this Clubhouse member, with all his problems, has been chosen to come here this morning and deliver a message of hope even during trials that are unbearable and unexplainable. No pressure right? Hey -, are you sure you picked the right guy here? Me, really? Ok, Lord help me.

On a serious note now, What an opportunity we have to assemble, to gather, to fellowship, to celebrate, to share, to learn, to identify, to seek resources, to encourage, to support, and most importantly, to recover!

If you sit in this room and you hurt, you suffer, you are depressed, confused, lonely, isolated, you must know you are not alone! We have been there, some of us are there with you, and we welcome you! If you are a family member of someone trying to understand more about mental illness and behavioral health, we welcome you!

I don't have much time. It would take a Hollywood movie or novel to describe my life story and the events that brought me to the right here and right now of my life. What I can say in a nutshell is mental illness is real. I lived with a stigma for 45-years of my life. I lived with the notion that mental illness may be a real thing; real for everyone else but me. That people did suffer from many conditions, that there were many lunatics out there, but I was not one of them.

Let me tell you a few experienced based truths. Mental illness is real. Some people are born with and must live with mental disabilities and some acquire them along the way (pointing at myself). Mental disorders can be mild or they can be severe. Treatment may require medications short term or for life, even psychiatric care, even assisted living for severe cases. It does not discriminate. It does not care if you were in prison; if you are homeless and destitute, or if you grew up with a silver spoon. Mental illness does not care about your skin color, your culture, your beliefs, your religion or nationality. Mental illness does not care if you are uneducated, highly educated, a lowly laborer, a modest professional, or an executive. Mental illness does not care if you were molested, have a drinking or drug problem, or you have a perfect life. And finally and most importantly, mental illness destroys individuals and families. Make no mistake, it's a family disease. Mental illness is a life and death matter. Untreated mental illness is dangerous to those afflicted and often the people around them. When it comes to national news and mental health, it's never good news. It's often a tragedy involving someone mentally ill and they are not giving "us" good press. The stigmas are many the truths are few.

I can look back over my life clearly now and see that manifestations of mental illness began in me at age 13. At the time, I was an honor student involved in many extra-curricular events. I was a multi-sport superstar athlete, especially in baseball. I was born and raised in Los Angeles. I was a surfer, a skateboarder, a kid full of life. We were not rich by any means but a strong family up to this time. Lower to Middle-Class is a stretch. My Dad was a cab driver and my mom a night restaurant manager. I did not get all of the things I wanted, but I got all of the things I needed growing up. My

parents were married 50 years and both passed away just a few years ago, so I can't blame a broken home. At 13, two things happened that changed my life. My Aunt died of a horrible cancer and I was very close to her and she was the central glue of the family; getting us together, a catalyst, the organizer. And, while she was dying, and I was left unattended, I was being molested. See, I learned the thing in life I find to be the most deadly, it's called ANGER! My problems with anger and self-control were birthed and grew into a monster lasting 32 years, a monster only I could kill.

When my aunt died, the family died. We stopped gathering. For the rest of my teenage years, there was trouble. Straight A's to Straight F's in school. I quit all sports, was getting in trouble with police, getting arrested and going to juvenile halls, drinking alcohol and using illegal drugs, belonged to a street gang, quit school, committing crimes; anything to escape reality and survive. It was all sex, drugs, and heavy metal because I grew up in the 80's.

When I turned 17, I knew I had a choice. I could either go to prison or go to college. I managed to take my GED and graduate so off to college I went. So I grew up to be an overeducated pompous idiot.

In all honesty, I had an amazing career in government and defense. I had a talent in Human Resources, specifically recruiting mission critical candidates. I was a workaholic and that is how I coped. I also had talents in leadership and project management. I have worked for great companies like American Express, Lockheed Martin, Amgen, and MCI WorldCom. I have traveled all over the world. The climax of my career happened in 2007 to 2008 where I spent a year in Kuwait working on the largest US Army contract in the Middle-East at the time. I was the head of HR for a 600-million dollar annual contract reporting directly to the President of the company. I was an organizational leader. I had a marble apartment with a maid and nanny. My entire family lived in Kuwait with me. My children went to the American School of Kuwait. I made a lot of money. I was on top of the world.

In 2008, after Kuwait, we are back in the United States in Northern California. One day I am in K-Mart, a department store, shopping with my family. I went to the restroom and slipped on some soap on the floor and hit my head pretty good knocking myself out. I was rushed by ambulance to Emergency. The next year was horrible. Although this was physical, the mental anguish I endured was extreme as a result of the physical discomfort. I had extreme weight loss. I could not eat. I could not sleep. I was severely depressed. I could not hold down medications and was having adverse reactions. I was suffering from headaches, neck aches, back aches. I did manage to recover physically after a year but I went through mental trauma for many months'.

In 2009, I had an incident involving police, where I didn't do anything wrong. The problem is in small towns in Nebraska, they have their own constitution. I was retaliated against for knowing and demanding my rights by having my civil rights decimated. I don't even know how to tell the story it's so outrageous. What you need to know is I did nothing wrong. I was put into a mental institution for 17-days and administered intense psychotropic medications with no history of

mental illness never having medications. I was misdiagnosed with falsehoods. All with no probable cause and the police were dishonest and did not protect and serve that day. I should note that I was not dealing with officers trained in crisis intervention, a hot topic in the mental health community globally, but I won't go there right now.

After this incident I was never the same; my marriage was never the same; my family never the same; my friendships and my relationships never the same; up and until this very moment. My life has never been the same from that traumatic day until now.

From the incident on June 29, 2009 to 2014, my family went from having the houses, the cars, the money, the stuff, the jobs, the great reputation, the well liked kids - and we lost everything and ended up homeless. We were tied up in a federal litigation and trial during this time because we sued those cops, moving from Nebraska to Nevada to California to Iowa. The cops were found guilty in a federal trial. They lost their jobs. They lost their pensions. The problem is that when we made it to trial after 4-years, we weren't fighting the cops anymore; we were fighting the billion-dollar insurance company and their lawyers representing them. So the cops were found responsible and a nominal award for one-dollar was issued, so really the insurance company won as they did their job to mitigate damages. Judges in this country do not give out awards against government unless it is beyond egregious and outrageous. They will convict the cops, they will lose their jobs and pensions, but there is not high success in punitive awards in police misconduct matters even though the situation is extreme and damaging.

When we received verdict we had won but really lost, it was the beginning to the end of my family. Mental illness began to ravage our family as we had our hearts set on restoration. When financial restoration did not come, the demons did come, the kind that tell you "you are worthless", "you deserve this", "your life is over", or worse "this is all your fault"; many of you know exactly what I am talking about.

After the verdict, I was positive. I told my family I thought God had something better for us. It was tough for us and we were just lost in our emotions growing farther apart. But good news as my wife was promoted and offered a position to relocate to Denver, including the relocation costs. She accepted the position and the family left and relocated to this area in August of 2014, almost 15 months ago.

In January 2015, after being in Colorado only 5-months, I describe it like I had been blindfolded, put in the trunk of a car, driven about 35 miles, and shoved out at some corner in a place I did not know, where I knew nobody. The place was Greeley, Colorado. That's how I describe my separation from my wife and family of 16 years. My two children are 14 and 10. I don't even call it a separation; I call it desertion and abandonment as its nothing I wanted or agreed with. My wife simply had enough and was extreme about it and I can only say I feel it was harsh and unfair. To describe the details, circumstances, and handling is just too painful and too fresh for me to deal with and I do not want to speak badly about

my wife. I had a complete and total breakdown because I love my wife and family deeply. This breakup of 16 years sent me over the edge into uncontrollable sobbing. So much so, I took myself to the Emergency Room, told them the truth, and I was promptly admitted and transferred to the Hotel California where I spent the next four days being administered intense psychotropic medications and participating in all efforts in my recovery.

This time, it was my choice and my decision to be there. I voluntarily admitted myself. I wanted help, I came clean, I confessed my severe depression, my anxiety, my pressures, what was going on, and I was admitted. I also admitted to myself I was mentally ill. It was the beginning of good decisions and choices I made; and although it may sound morbid, the hospitalization is the best thing that ever happened to me. I thank Mountain Crest in Fort Collins for their hospitality if there is anyone in the room.

After my hospitalization, I returned to Greeley and went to North Range Behavioral Health "Crisis Stabilization" center. Surprisingly, they admitted me into their "Respite" program, a newer program. It all started from there. I was able to do intake with North Range Adult Outpatient Program. It was my therapist from there who referred me to The Frontier House. My recovery began.

From the day I walked in to the Frontier House, about 8-months ago, I was welcomed and met with respect. I remember during my tour, I was in the dining room of The Frontier House, and I saw a motto on the wall that said "Clubhouse changed my life", and it truly has. It's not because all of my problems got solved or my life got restored. I spent six-months essentially homeless, living in shelters, motels, my van, and any couch available from anyone willing. The hope I give is that I never gave up, and despite the storm of my life, I chose to make better choices and decisions to recover! One of those choices I made was to show up to the Clubhouse when it was unbearable, to cope, to take my medication, and to go to therapy. I was showing up during the unfair, the unjust, and even cruel and wicked things happening to me.

At the Clubhouse, never was I judged, made to be unwelcome. If anything, the more I showed up, the more support I received. When you show up, and you want to be there, and you want to get through it, no matter what it is, people will rally around you, staff and members!

This year, I returned to work for the first time in six-years. The Frontier House made the connection and I was working under the supported employment program. I also successfully went through a process with the Colorado Division of Vocational Rehabilitation. Recently, I left my job. I actually loved my job for about three months working for \$9.25 hour, part time. I am not being sarcastic. It was not an easy job. Probably the hardest job I ever had, imagine that! I was alive and excited, even told I had a future.

But, the fourth month was dread for me, and I don't have an explanation. I just had a boss who did not like me, who I got on the wrong side of, and I made an abrupt choice to leave. I chose to leave to avoid what I felt was already a situation of mental and emotional abuse that was only going to escalate and never improve. I was getting depressed. I was having anxiety. I was not being treated properly. It was a situation directly involving my mental health, bringing out mental illness in me, and I made a choice and decision to cut out what I thought was bad for me. I knew exactly what I was doing, and I would do it again if it gets in the way of recovery.

I am no longer homeless and rent a room near the local university. I have a lot of faith in my efforts to be employed again and I have many promising leads at the moment. I feel my executive days are over as I feel I am being called to a life of service. Hey, if I'm doing a good job here, I need a job people. Maybe you know someone that needs a public speaker?

My job is to tell you the truth, which is that Frontier House has given me a safe place to go. It's a place filled with hope, and a place that adheres to all Clubhouse International Standards. These Clubhouses are important to local communities. I work in our clerical unit. I am a volunteer member driver, and I come when I can, which is often. Our Clubhouse is filled with activity, with life, with supporting people, with successes.

On a personal note, I have a son named Nathan. He is 10. He is hurting right now about the separation of his parents and family. I see my little man every weekend. This weekend is only the second weekend in six-months I have not seen him. We are very close, we are very tight. Our relationship is inseparable and impenetrable. On August 20<sup>th</sup>, My wife filed for divorce and I find myself heading into a fierce custody battle. I am anchored in his life because it's not his fault. My son wants to live with his Dad.

My message of hope to you is even during the worst moments, we still have the ability to make better decisions. I am so honored, and I want to conclude by emphasizing that my having mental illness is never an excuse or justification to act poorly.

Everyone in this room is blessed, because we all have the ability to choose recovery; to choose hope; to choose community. We are the fortunate ones – because each of us here has a Clubhouse community to hold us up and believe in us. We can get through our worst moments, because we have each other, our International Clubhouse community.

So this week - let's learn and grow and celebrate everything we are and everything we can be.

Let the party begin!