



Clubhouse International

15IS PLENARY PRESENTATION

SIDE-BY-SIDE: THE GREAT CLUBHOUSE DYNAMIC

Andy Wilson, Carriage House, Indiana

Good morning! I am Andy Wilson, from the Carriage House in Fort Wayne, Indiana. I was asked to share a little bit about my introduction to the concept of side-by-side work in the Clubhouse. I mean, I'm not the sharpest tool in the shed but it seems like it ought to be a pretty simple concept, right? Side-by-side just doesn't sound that complicated.

And yet, for me, it has been the central aspect of the Clubhouse Model. And, one that I struggled with really understanding for a long time.

Now, I am embarrassed to admit that when I first came to the Clubhouse, I may have been a little bit full of myself. I had just finished graduate school, I still had hair, and was pretty sure that I was the coolest thing ever.

Side note: I wasn't.

I was living in mom and dad's basement in St. Louis, scrambling for a job and got an interview at some place called Midland House. I knew nothing about the Clubhouse Model or mental illness – frankly, I was not very bright. That has, however, never put a damper on my cockiness, so I got all gussied up and went for my interview.

The interview was tough, but I thought it was going pretty good. Then they asked a question that I still think about. “What's the difference between you and someone with a mental illness?”

I froze. I mean I had to answer the question, right? But what was the answer? My mom had been taking medication and going to therapy for years to deal with her depression. My sister was still in therapy dealing with issues. My grandmother had made a suicide attempt when I was a small. But wasn't that different?

Wasn't I educated? I mean, here I was with my newly minted college degrees. But no, I knew for a fact that one of the people sitting across from me was a psychologist with a PhD and he was a member of the Clubhouse... I began to suspect my degrees weren't all that impressive in this group of people; and they certainly didn't constitute the difference between me and 'them'.

But didn't I have a lot of experience? Here I had traveled the world, seen and done remarkable things – But no, the people sitting around the table were older than me, looked quite a bit wiser than me – many had already raised children and succeeded in



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their careers – all of them certainly knew more about mental illness than I would ever know.

The silence stretched on. Eventually, I said the only thing I could think of - “I guess not much.” And with that, I had taken my first baby step in unwinding my own internal stigma about mental illness. And shockingly, they hired me.

I guess I had always fancied myself one of those evolved people who had transcended the prevalent societal isms. But here I was trying to put into words exactly what I thought about ‘them’. I realized that in my heart of hearts, I already had a pretty clear picture of the mentally ill. I also had a clear picture of how I was going to use my vast 23 year old experience and my high-faluting theatre and theology degrees to help these poor souls. And I thought that this made me exceptional – one of the good guys. I just didn’t get that this was a manifestation of my stigma.

Through my life in the Clubhouse Model, I have learned that ‘not much’ is *exactly* the difference between those of us with a mental illness and those of us without one. I began this learning curve on my first day.

The Unit Meeting

So I get the job. I’m now a ‘clubhouse staff person’ – I’m feeling pretty good about that – I brag to all my friends. But, I have *no* idea what that means – no clue what I’m supposed to do.

About 9am the action started. Someone made an overhead page saying that a unit meeting was about to start in the clerical area. People came down from upstairs and in off the porch and sat down around the big meeting table.

Someone volunteered to facilitate the meeting. Aha, I thought, that must be a staff. Yes! Leading meetings! I can do that!

Side note: the facilitator wasn’t a staff person.

The facilitator asked for announcements and news. It was odd. It sounded like a family around the breakfast table. I thought maybe it was a warm up to some good meaty therapy. I was just waiting for someone to share how they felt about their mother when the facilitator made some joke about Hal being older than dirt and said, “we should really get to work.”



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The list of things that needed to get done was long. People started to volunteer to do things. A little cajoling and friendly ribbing and more people volunteered. I wasn't quite sure what to do, but thankfully the facilitator volunteered me for something. So, that morning, I began my Clubhouse career by cleaning the bathroom with Simon.

The Work Ordered Day

In a Clubhouse, I quickly came to learn, we don't do group; there are no groups. I can't tell you how sad I was about that. Those groups would have been great on my first day. I know where I fit there. As a trained actor, I know how to tilt my head and nod in the right places while someone shares something with me. I know when to laugh and lighten the mood and how to sigh and shake my head in compassion. Heck, I could facilitate the snot out of processing group. And, I would know my role: compassionate, friendly, caregiver. I could win awards at that stuff.

Side note: Nobel Peace Prize here I come!

But, no. Jennifer, my boss, has given me the least helpful instructions in the world: "be a part of the work-ordered day and build relationships."

Simon called me over. I was pretty scared. Initially I had thought that maybe my job would be to help Simon focus or organize the work or stay on task or find the supplies. But now, thinking about the least helpful instructions, I wondered if maybe I was supposed to just watch him clean the bathroom and talk to him.

Turns out, it was neither. We were actually going to clean the bathroom. Yup, just that. Side-by-side. Clean the bathroom. Simon handed me some paper towels and said, why don't you do the mirrors and sinks? I half heartedly wiped the mirror, thinking that surely someone must come in after 5:00 to do the real cleaning. I tried a couple of times to ask something deep and insightful – something that would make Simon cry and have a profound 'breakthrough'. He smiled. I suspected he was humoring me; really laughing at me.

Side note: He was.

Some kind of therapy, I thought. Cleaning bathrooms. And my mom and dad paid good money for that theatre degree. What a waste. 'Well, hell' I thought, at least I know how to clean a bathroom – I'll show them how great I am by cleaning it really well. So, in that moment my focus changed. It wasn't about Simon, it wasn't about his illness; it wasn't about therapy, or my professionalism. It was about the bathroom. Turns out,



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Simon is pretty good at cleaning bathrooms. He had a technique for getting under the rim that I had never seen.

We finished and decided we would do the upstairs bathroom as well. Now, I can't say that I was having fun – I was, after all, cleaning bathrooms – but I began to be, I don't know, comfortable. I knew what I was doing – had a sense of purpose and I began to suspect that Simon didn't hate me.

We finished and Simon said, "tomorrow we'll do the floors."

I suspect that when Simon said that one sentence, 'tomorrow we'll do the floors' – my self-esteem grew more than it ever would have in years of group. What I heard was: you're good, you did a nice job, and I wouldn't mind working with you tomorrow. It felt good. Really good. And it changed the way I looked at myself – at least in this crazy place I'm good at this one thing; at least I'm respected by this one person.

So *this*, it occurred to me, is why we work at the Clubhouse. Instead of talking about, and thinking about, and journaling about, and meditating about how we get better from our illness: we just *are* better. We contribute, we share our skills, we are needed, we are thanked; and it changes the way we think about ourselves. I didn't have to *do* anything – just work side-by-side the people.

I thought I had it. Now I understood the Clubhouse Model.

Side note: I mentioned that I'm not very bright, right?

So over time I was getting to know Simon and also Jane and Larry and Hal and Meredith and Rick and lots of other people. I got to know their stories and they got to know mine. I discovered that there's no play book for this – there is no training. It's just something that happens when you work next to someone over time. It is not something intentional, and more than anything, it's not something you can rush.

You just get to know each other. If someone is friendly and good at what you are doing together, you get to respect them. And, ultimately, over time, you get to care about them. In short, we build relationships. This is what happens when people work together over time; we build relationships.

I sometimes worry about the constant concern to produce outcomes for funders– it makes me feel a little like 'the staff are providing this service to the members to produce this



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outcome' instead of 'members and staff working side-by-side with people building a real community of hope and opportunity.' Sometimes these things look a lot alike – heck, sometimes they look identical – but it seems to me that the core of our beliefs, the core of our culture, the core of the Model is based on a different set of presumptions; a more esoteric notion, that people with and without mental illness can work together to build a different kind of community; a community in which we don't fix each other or even provide 'services' for each other. A community in which there is real hope, real dignity, real need, real opportunity; and in this kind of community people get better.

Conclusion

"It's about the relationships" – It seems to me that this has rightly been our mantra in the Clubhouse Model... And yet, I think it's safe to say that all relationships are not created equally. Some are domineering, lopsided, even abusive. It's been my experience that the side-by-side nature of the Clubhouse; the mutual need, shared responsibility, genuine respect – this is what makes relationships transcend the mundane and become the fertile ground for this kind of community.

I sometimes think that this is the gift that Clubhouses give to the world... the reality of healthy relationships in a community of hope and respect that creates a space in which we all get better. What we do is the best dream of families, religious communities, and villages across around the world. Together, members and staff give this gift to each other and to the world everyday

And, in the Clubhouse way: side by side.