

## **Work Works!**

Work saved my life. Really. At times when I was most depressed work got me out of the house, forced me to keep moving, interact with people, and distracted me from my overwhelming symptoms. When I reached the point where I felt I had no reason to go on, work showed me I could be successful. When I felt I had nowhere to go, working helped me gain the focus to turn my life around. That's why I do what I do. Not only do I believe in it in theory, I have reaped the rewards in my own life.

I have been doing employment counseling for several years now for V.O.W. (Vocational Opportunity Works), working with adults who suffer from serious and persistent mental illness. People with mental illness face many barriers. One that often holds them back, even once they have been stabilized, is their self-esteem. Poor self-esteem prevents people from taking the risks necessary to become successful. And success is one of the key components to positive self-esteem.

Work is a therapeutic tool that, along with other supports like medications and therapy, can help people regain and rebuild their lives. Everyone shares some common needs including the need to feel useful, wanted, sociable, respected and important. People want to be able to learn new things, use their skills, be proud of their work, and have meaning in their lives. In our society work is a significant part of our identity. When we meet someone new one of the first things often asked is "What do you do for work?" I don't know too many people who would chose to say, "I am a full-time mentally ill person" and they shouldn't have to. In the last decade the medications used to treat mental illness have made it possible for people to manage their symptoms and changes in the laws around benefits have made it more economically possible.

Still a majority of the adults with mental illness in this area aren't working. There are a number of reasons but one seems to jump out at me. Fear. Fear on the part of employers, coworkers, and others in society who have not been educate about mental illness. Fear on the part of people with mental illness that they will not be accepted and cannot succeed. The only real way that I know to combat fear is through education. People fear what they do not know or understand. As a community we must work together and be willing to open our minds and talk about how we can work together for everyone's benefit. There are hundreds of mentally ill adults who are capable of doing some type of work and there are always employers looking to hire. It's time to bridge the gap. When it comes to helping people regain their status and place in society; work works.

George V. Nostrand