



Mildred Consulting and Advocacy

Polycymaking with People in Mind

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TO: Interested Parties

FROM: Laurel Mildred
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RE: EMERGING ISSUE OF STIGMA AND DISCRIMINATION AGAINST PEOPLE WITH MENTAL HEALTH DISABILITIES

Please Distribute Widely

A showdown over a significant issue of stigma and discrimination is brewing in Campbell, California, where a business has recently opened calling itself "Psycho Donuts." Local disability activists led by the Silicon Valley Independent Living Center have begun to educate the public about the devastating impacts of stigma and discrimination and confront the tactic of developing profit at the expense of people with mental health disabilities.

For your information, attached below is an editorial submitted to the Mercury News which outlines the seriousness of the matter to people with lived experience of mental health issues.

Those wishing to write to the Mercury News with their perspective about Psycho Donuts may send an email letter of up to 125 words to: letters@mercurynews.com. Those wishing to support local organizers in objecting to this business concept may contact the Silicon Valley Independent Living Center at 408-894-9041 (tty 408-894-9012), 2306 Zanker Road, San Jose, CA 95131, info@svilc.org.

Op-Ed Piece Submitted to the Mercury News

"Psycho Donuts" Sells Stigma and Discrimination

In Campbell, California, two entrepreneurs have decided to "take the donut to the next level," selling over-the-top pastry creations they hope will be the next big thing. Unfortunately, they've branded their new venture "Psycho Donuts," featuring a padded cell where children can pose in a straitjacket, and naming their donuts "the Cracker Attacker," "the Bipolar" and "Massive Head Trauma." It seems that

the next big thing is really a very old thing: trying to make a profit at the expense of people who have struggled to overcome mental illness.

According to the Surgeon General, "stigmatization of people with mental disorders has persisted throughout history. It is manifested by bias, distrust, stereotyping, fear, embarrassment, anger and avoidance. Stigma leads others to avoid living, socializing, working with, renting to, or employing people with mental disorders, especially severe disorders such as schizophrenia. It . . . leads to low self-esteem, isolation and hopelessness. It deters the public from seeking, and wanting to pay for, care. In its more overt and egregious form, stigma results in outright discrimination and abuse. More tragically, it **deprives people of their dignity and interferes with their full participation in society.**"

Stigma refers to negative feelings people experience when they encounter mental illness and the children, adults and family members who face it. *Discrimination* is action taken to deprive people of their rights based on those negative feelings. Both contribute to the lack of appropriate funding for mental health services, as well as opportunities for education, employment, housing, friends and social connection. Stigma can create feelings of deep shame in people who experience mental illnesses, and keeps many from seeking help. "It is undoubtedly threatening and personally disheartening to believe that one has developed an illness that others are afraid of" (Link, 2001).

Featuring a "padded cell" exploits the worst historic abuses of the mental health system, where people with mental health disabilities were sometimes starved, tied to beds, beaten, and subject to "ice pick lobotomies," electroconvulsive shock treatments, and immobilizing medications. Few people are aware that California leading social "reformers" corresponded with Nazi counterparts about the German eugenics program and successfully used Nazi ideas to promote the forced sterilization of untold numbers of California residents in state hospitals, resulting in about 80% of the nationwide involuntary sterilizations that were performed under state auspices. Finally, after a life of institutionalized abuse, people with mental disabilities were dumped into unmarked, sometimes mass graves, deprived of all human dignity. "Psycho Donuts" is located just 12 miles from the former Agnews State Hospital, where over 8,751 people were buried in unmarked graves.

But "Psycho Donuts" doesn't just reference history. By promoting the "psycho" idea and naming a donut the "Cracker Attacker," they are promoting what is still the greatest and most troubling myth about mental illness – that people who experience mental illness are violent. Research has demonstrated (MacArthur Study, 1999), and recently re-affirmed in a new study (Elbogen, 2009), that people with mental illness are no more likely to be dangerous than anyone else in the population, and are in fact, much more likely to be targeted as victims of crime, especially those who are homeless (deGiere, 2004).

One owner of this new business suggests that anyone critical of his business concept simply lacks a sense of humor. Unfortunately, he isn't offering a joke on himself. He's offering a joke on people who can ill afford it, given that they may not be able to rent an apartment, get a job or be able to make friends because of stigma and discrimination. Somehow that's just not sweet or funny.

Laurel Mildred, MSW, is a mental health policy consultant and the author of the report, Eliminating Stigma and Discrimination Against People with Mental Health Disabilities: A Project of the Mental Health Services Act, which can be found at: <http://www.dmh.ca.gov/MHSAAC/docs/StigmaAndDiscriminationReport07Jun12.pdf>