



Living and working with mental illness



Andrea Schmook is on a mission as Director of Consumer Directed Services at Anchorage Community Mental Health Services. (Shawn Wilson/KTUU-TV)

by Joy Mapaye
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ANCHORAGE, Alaska -- Andrea Schmook is on a mission. As Director of Consumer Directed Services at Anchorage Community Mental Health Services she is trying to connect people with mental illness to jobs.

She said about 85 percent of people with mental illness don't work.

"There's a lot of people that want to go to work, but they don't know how to do it," Schmook said.



Schmook said she assumed the identity of the Virgin Mary. (KTUU-TV)

Schmook knows about the issue firsthand -- in the '70s she was diagnosed with a mental illness.

She said she was married with two young children when her husband started drinking and taking drugs. Schmook said the situation made her feel isolated, confused and afraid.

"I had no insight what was going on inside of me and didn't notice that I was very emotionally distraught. I started hearing voices, I started hallucinating and I became very delusional," Schmook said.



Anchorage Community Mental Health Services Medical Director Dr. Lucy Curtiss said Schmook doesn't let her illness hinder her. (Shawn Wilson/KTUU-TV)

Her delusions caused her to take on a new identity.

"I assumed the identity of the Virgin Mary and I put the cover from the bird cage over my head because the Virgin Mary has to have a veil," Schmook said.

She said she felt she had a mission from God to take care of children, not only hers, but children everywhere.

"It was very, very hard to accept the fact that I had a mental illness," Schmook said.

Her sister intervened and sought help, and eventually Schmook ended up at the Alaska Psychiatric Institute. Doctors told her she would never have a normal life. They said she couldn't work and would forever need other people's help.



Schmook said about 85 percent of people with a mental illness don't work. (Shawn Wilson/KTUU-TV)

Schmook's family told her she had a different choice. They urged her to take charge of her life and not let her illness dictate her fate.

She said her recovery began when she decided to face the challenge head on each day.

She even went back to work.

"I knew that going to work was going to help me and I felt it was really important that I faced every single day as it came," Schmook said.

Anchorage Community Mental Health Services Medical Director Dr. Lucy Curtiss said Schmook doesn't let her illness hinder her.

"Andrea is a good example of someone who has accepted mental



illness and found a way to live life with it so it doesn't become who she is or limit what she can do," Curtiss said.

Curtiss said Schmook's case is one that reflects recovery and the fact that those with mental illness can lead productive lives.

"A person can live life to their full potential," Curtiss said.

Curtiss said all too often people see the very extreme cases of mental illness portrayed and are afraid of those diagnosed.

Schmook said those who seek help for mental illness should be applauded and given adequate resources to succeed in recovery. (Shawn Wilson/KTUU-TV)

"Unfortunately, when mental illness is portrayed in the media, it's usually extreme cases of people who have acted violently. And it's not just in the news, it's also in movies and TV programs. People with mental illness are portrayed as being very dangerous,"

Curtiss said.

She said the opposite is true. Curtiss said people with mental illness are more likely to be victims of crime than perpetrators. She also said those with mental illness are often lonely and don't know where to go for help.

Schmook said that's why she's reaching out and has become a spokesperson for mental illness. She's even chair of the Alaska Mental Health Board.

Schmook said those who seek help for mental illness should be applauded and given adequate resources to succeed in recovery.

It's something she strives for, for herself and the others she hopes to help.

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