

## Community Action Report – Maladjusted

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On February 21<sup>st</sup>, 2015, the Grande Prairie Friendship Centre invited the Theatre for Living to perform the play, Maladjusted, in Grande Prairie. This play addresses the need for humanization in mental health care. It provides situations that represent issues that are typical in mental health care. The audience is then invited to participate in and interact with the situations that are presented to grow understanding and direction towards the humanization of mental health care.

The play involved six characters, each with their own perspectives. Jack is a street involved individual who, with the direction of a social worker, is placed in a recovery house that does not fully meet his needs. His intake worker, Frank, is on automatic pilot doing his job routinely as a way of coping with the repetitive nature of trying to help people whether they want his particular brand of help or not. Abby, the social worker, feels constrained by the limited options for Jack, the rules around the needs of the recovery house and the directions she receives from her superior, Dr. Devreaux. Dr. Devreaux is a psychiatrist who is managing a social service experiencing extreme budget cuts and also operating within his training of prescribing medication as a simple and quick solution. He prescribes this medication after completing a checklist to Dannie, a teen brought to him by her mother, Mia, because of Dannie's withdrawal from school and life. Mia comes with her own mental health issues and cleans compulsively to avoid addressing them. Everything ties together when we discover that the intake work from the recovery house, Frank, is also Dannie's uncle.

The audience in Grande Prairie expressed several reactions, some of which were voiced or observed:

- Sometimes caregivers have to be too forceful
- There is a real fear of the stigma of being seen as "crazy" – especially for teens
- There is a lack of genuine care that is authentic. People want to be heard and understood
- Not only those needing services but those giving services all have their power taken away
- There is a push to prescribe as a quick solution
- The audience noted that there aren't enough places for people without homes to go

Some policy suggestions people made in reaction to scenes in the play included:

- The need for female counsellors
- The need for female policy makers
- Quicker access to pharmacy staff
- Safe places to go when people are not in recovery
- There should be more open criteria to access supports, not restrictive

- It's not always appropriate to have a separation between adults and youth services
- Often times people working in helping fields can become " automatic", policy needs to allow for the building of personal connections
- Policy to ensure that workers are able to refresh themselves with professional development, slow down, take time for themselves and engage in self-care

Some of the themes that emerged during the interaction include:

- Sometimes acting professional and backing away from a confrontation actually makes things worse for the care giver. This happened when Frank was angry that Jack had followed his niece home. When he encountered Jack by surprise at Abby's agency, instead of expressing his anger, he tried to pull back and ended up receiving a threat from Jack that he would look for Frank's niece again. Jack said that he would likely follow through with his threat just to spite Frank. In this case, professional distance came at a personal risk.
- Parents are at a loss of how to approach their teens. They feel conflicted wanting to both approach and pull away. Someone who stepped in to play Mia tried reverse psychology of being irresponsible with her daughter to show her daughter's irresponsibility. Interestingly enough, the daughter later approached the uncle, Frank, as a way of getting away from her strange acting mother. So sometimes poor attempts at solutions may work out in unexpected ways. However some other themes emerged from this scene. Parents are easily drawn into reacting and responding with a sense of urgency to a situation such as the school calling. Parents need to self-manage themselves to be patient and intentional to be effective.
- Several of those who stepped into the roles of characters in need articulately expressed their needs to those who could help. This was the case of Dannie who asked that her mother leave the room while she talked to her psychiatrist and then asked about therapies other than medication. It happened when Jack articulated that he wanted a safe, warm place where he didn't have to be in "recovery." Another time Jack clearly asked for what he needed to be in the recovery house without his medication. When the audience was asked whether those in need would routinely be able to express themselves with such clarity, they generally felt that it was less likely than the scenarios where the needs were not expressed and chaos ensued.
- One scene had a worker talk about how he had lost faith in people because of trying to help so very many people with similar problems are being unsuccessful. There was a feeling of not daring to "be gentle." The worker explains that he responds that way because that's the way he was treated when he was in that situation. The audience advised the worker to be less judgemental and not to let the job harden the worker.
- In a scene where young Dannie talked with her psychiatrist, she expressed the need to fully understand what was wrong with her when given a simple diagnosis of "mood disorder." The psychiatrist didn't go straight to prescribing drugs because Dannie gave him more information about herself beyond what was on the check box forms she had filled out. Dannie wanted to be offered options so that she could make a choice of what worked for her. If that didn't work, she might want to make a different choice later on.

- In one scene, Jack talked about needing to make sure that people “are doing thing I need” when engaging with Frank. He wanted Frank to listen. He wanted Frank to understand enough to break or bend the rules in this circumstance. Staff are often forced to break rules if they want to provide the support someone truly needs.
- Abby, the social worker, understood the human politics of care. When she was in conflict with her supervisor, Dr. Devraux, she made sure that they discussed it privately so as not to embarrass him in public. She expressed her exasperation by saying “we can’t continue to do the same thing over and over again.” Dr. Devraux expressed that sometimes he could have offered a solution but he didn’t because he was waiting until someone asked for it – in this case Abby. He expressed a reluctance to take risks and be proactive.

A common theme that emerged when scenes were replayed with audience participation was that people were able to clearly articulate their needs in the situation. They needed fortitude to pull themselves together enough to ask for what they needed. In the case of Dannie with the psychiatrist, she needed to clearly ask that her mother not be present. In the case of Jack thinking of returning to the shelter, he needed to ask Frank for specific things he needed to manage the time without his medication. For those in helping roles, they needed to govern themselves sufficiently to be effective. The mother needed to be patient instead of trying to urgently address the issues. When Frank was angry that Jack had gone to his niece’s place, he needed to back off enough to not confront Jack ineffectively. It’s as if we’re expecting people to set their emotions aside and operate from a rational place only.