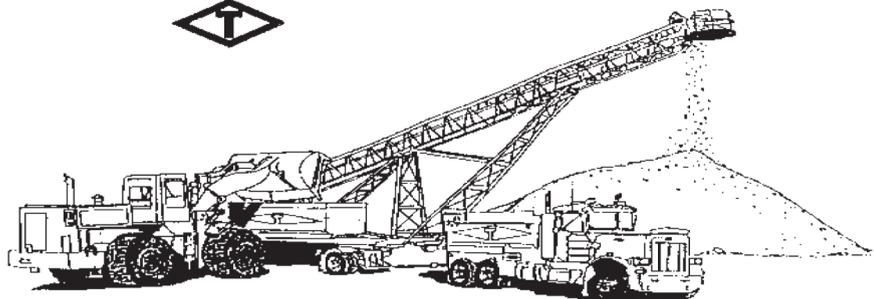


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Josh, our administrator, and his assistants Deandra and Sharon have met every challenge.

Our contractor Stan Chapman and Paul Singly his superintendent, have been both professional and sensitive to our unique needs. The quality of their workmanship is exceptional.

Our neighbors, Mr. and Mrs. Carnation have been so generous and understanding for many long months.

The Forestville community has had to put up with our noise, our dust and many times inconvenience along their major thoroughfare.

Our business services and associates have taken care of our needs and the Forestville Water Department has been patient as we change one thing after another.

And last – but not least...we want to thank the Forestville Fire Department for their patience and ability to work with us to make Mirabel Lodge a first-rate, efficient, safe, and secure facility.

Judy & Alain Serkissian



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Empowerment: What is it?

Why and How the Russian River Empowerment Center Offers It?

By Mary Black

Empowerment is a process that challenges our assumption about the way things are and can be. It challenges our basic assumptions about power, helping, achieving, and succeeding. It refers to increasing the spiritual, psychological, social, political or economic strength of individuals and communities. It often involves the empowered developing confidence in their own abilities.

Power is at the core of the concept of empowerment. Intrinsic to the process of empowering an individual or group is choosing to change, move, or transfer power, as well as to expand it. Power does not exist in isolation, nor is it obtained at the expense of another, instead gaining power actually strengthens the power of others. Empowerment is realized in relationships of collaboration, sharing and mutuality and it can move individuals and groups from insecurity to security.

Empowerment is a multi-dimensional social process that helps people gain control over their own lives. It is a process that fosters power in people for use in their own lives, their community, and in their society by acting on issues they define as important. The individual and the community are fundamentally connected and in collaborations based on mutual respect, diverse perspectives, and a developing vision people work toward creative and realistic solutions. This inclusive individual and collective understanding of empowerment is crucial in a project such as ours at the Russian River Empowerment Center, where our mission is to offer individuals with mental illness a place to choose their own path to recovery empowering all of us to move forward from surviving to thriving.

Why the Russian River Empowerment Center came into being is from the beginning a story of empowerment, a story of how power had to change and expand. Up until 2004 when Proposition 63, the Mental Health Services Act (MHSA), was passed by California voters, mental health state funding was only delivered to public county agencies, such as the County of Sonoma Mental Health Clinics, providing traditional services in treatment-based settings staffed by mental health clinicians. These types of clinics are part of an expensive mental health system that has endured extreme cuts in funding and thus services since the time Ronald Reagan was governor. Finally, in 2003 the County of Sonoma Mental Health Clinic in Guerneville was eliminated and some of the staff was moved to Santa Rosa as part of a "regional team" expected to serve patients from Cloverdale, Petaluma, Sonoma and Guerneville by traveling to these communities.

Then because the MHSA stipulated that state funding would only be given to new community based mental health programs and the Russian River had been identified by a state survey as a community now under-served by mental health services, the process of empowerment began to take form. At this point a coalescence of aware and concerned community citizens occurred and the vision of a new empowerment center for the mentally ill along the Russian River began to grow. It was the Consumer Advisory Committee from Sonoma County and the County of Sonoma Mental Health Clinic that reached out to the Russian River community. They began to organize peer advocates at meetings at the Veterans Hall in Guerneville and then into smaller focus groups. These meetings and groups were attended by community mental health consumers, advocates and staff from West County Community Services (WCCS), the largest private non-profit community services agency in West Sonoma County. We were fortunate on the River to have mental health advocates familiar with and inspired by the successes of the non-traditional types of support-based private programs such as Interlink, funded by the Goodwill Industries of the Redwood Empire, located in Santa Rosa. This model and other state's support-based mental health consumer-driven models were helpful in shaping the vision for what would become the Russian River Empowerment Center.

Having decided to share and expand their power for the purpose of empowering others in their community and making the vision of the Russian River Empowerment Center into a reality are: Helen Baum, a long time Guerneville resident and a retired Registered Nurse from the County of Sonoma Mental Health Clinic, who advocated for and brought her clients to the peer meetings; Sylvia Plowright, a Guerneville resident and mental health advocate, who was very knowledgeable of the consumer-driven mental health movement; Gina Whiteley, a Guerneville resident and a mental health advocate, who found the beautiful house at 16229 Third Street in Guerneville that serves as the Russian River Empowerment Center; Bruce Alfano, the Executive Director of WCCS, who responded to the community by successfully getting a Request for a Proposal from the County of Sonoma and oversees the program; and Jess Wolfe, the Program Coordinator of the Russian River Empowerment Center, a mental health consumer and the designer of the center's mission statement, environment and the consumer-run, drop-in mental health program.

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