

An Interview With Dr. Fred Frese

Dr. Frese, continued

“The mental health industry is built on confidentiality,” he said, and secrecy only reinforces the stigma. “It’s so obvious to me that the people who say they are protecting us are perpetuating the shame. . . . The professionals shouldn’t assume the patient is ashamed of the illness.”

He speaks from the perspective of both patient and mental health professional.

Frese, 66, was unemployed for a year after his psychotic break...When a friend suggested he could help him get a job in the state mental health system, he took the state test to be a certified psychologist. It was 1968, when a psychology degree was not required to take the test. He began working with the mentally ill in prison.

The work agreed with him, and he decided he’d need a doctorate in psychology to gain credibility in the field. He earned the degree in 1978, and was director of psychology at Western Reserve State Hospital ... for 15 years before he retired. “I was able to keep a job,” he said. “If they hadn’t come up with these wonderful pills, I’d still be hospitalized.”

Frese is certain his illness gives him a better understanding of people with schizophrenia, and that his openness makes him a role model for others with the disease. He travels about half the year, giving speeches nationwide -- more than 2,000 so far. He’s testified at congressional hearings and appeared on ABC’s “Nightline” four times “when they needed a schizophrenic with a Ph.D.,” he said, quite amused.

Frese’s speeches benefit mental health professionals, too, said Nancy Little, training director of Thresholds Institute, Chicago’s largest mental health agency. “We were amazed that this person had an advanced degree and a high position in mental health. He totally changed our view of what people with schizophrenia could do.” And he has a one-of-a-kind ability to convey the experience of schizophrenia with humor.

In fact, Frese delights in calling himself a stand-up schizophrenic. “That’s my gig!” he said. “When I started speaking, people couldn’t believe a schizophrenic could talk.”

Actually, people thought schizophrenics could talk, but only to themselves on street corners. Frese was delighted when the 2001 film, “A Beautiful Mind,” challenged that tired stereotype with the story of John F. Nash Jr. Nash, a mathematician with schizophrenia, won the Nobel Foundation’s Sveriges Riksbank Prize in Economic Sciences in 1994. “The movie resonated,” Frese said. “We weren’t portrayed as monsters like Hannibal Lecter or Norman Bates. I thought, “Heh-heh, we schizophrenics aren’t all useless after all.”

(The newspaper article continues with a few more pages about his successful marriage and family life. The article concludes with the following report that Fred still has occasional two day episodes when he “lives on another plane.”)

“While the episodes don’t reach the level of the psychotic break he experienced in Milwaukee, Fred Frese said they can signal that his mind is going places it might have trouble leaving. Munetz, of the Summit mental health board, can tell when Frese is entering an episode. “His thinking gets disorganized. It’s more grandiose than usual, or he starts wearing a hat.”

The hat is what Ray Gonzalez remembers from the late ‘70s when he and Frese were colleagues at the mental hospital. Executive director of Planned Lifetime Assistance Network of Northeastern Ohio, a social service agency for people with mental illness, Gonzalez said Frese would slouch in the corner at staff meetings, a wool hat pulled down on his head. “I didn’t know he was ill,” he said.

The only thing that separates Frese from the homeless people with schizophrenia is medication. “They don’t take their meds because they don’t think they’re sick,” Frese said.

And he knows for sure that he is. He’d like you to pass it on.” ✨

“It’s kind of fun to do the impossible.”

Walt Disney
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