

Remarks by Lauren Spiro for the opening of the SAMHSA History Exhibit at the SAMHSA headquarters, Rockville, Md.
July 14, 2010

Welcome. Thank you SAMHSA/ CMHS, Carlton, Paolo, and Kathryn for the opportunity for all of us to be part of this dedication today. I would like to point out (somewhat randomly) a few examples of original artifacts that you (the audience) may have missed: a straight jacket from a state mental institution in Pennsylvania; a certificate of a person of African heritage that states the reason for their institutionalization was their desire for: Freedom; *In Our Own Voice: African-American Stories of Oppression, Survival, and Recovery in Mental Health Systems*, by Vanessa Jackson; *Wild Indians: Native Perspectives on the Hiawatha Asylum for Insane Indians* by Pemina Yellow Bird; Two notebooks of information from the first Alternatives Conference in 1985, including workshop descriptions and photos courtesy, of Mike Finkle, *On Our Own* of Maryland, who sponsored the conference in Baltimore Md.; and an invitation/ announcement of the opening of the Pearl Ella Johnson Wellness Center, October 24, 2004 with a picture of Pearl on the cover.

Today the United States government, through the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, formally recognizes our history as an oppressed people and honors our struggle for dignity and human rights.

In 2007, when the National Coalition for Mental Health Recovery received a modest contract from SAMHSA to identify and collect artifacts from the movement for social justice of individuals with psychiatric histories, there was much excitement across the country. Many people shared their groundbreaking accomplishments of local, state and national importance. Their courage and their innovative initiatives have helped shatter the myths associated with mental health problems – myths that are so pervasive in our society.

Our vision is that this exhibit today will develop into a rich space where people from all walks of life can learn about the impact of mental health oppression and our collective fight for justice, dignity, and a full life in the community.

Our advisory committee was tasked with identifying 25 to 30 artifacts of national significance among the many contributions to the mental health consumer/survivor movement. These include:

For centuries people have cried out for help – for human connection – in creative and sometimes unusual ways. And because their genuine needs were misunderstood, they were typically feared, shunned, tortured, and sometimes killed. Their lives and their journeys of tenacity, of courage, of passion, of struggling against great forces, are honored today. Let us never forget the pain and suffering of the beautiful souls who are no longer with us but whose voices/whispers never fade. We recognize our moral obligation to build an inclusive and mutually respectful society.

We did not seek nor did we provoke the injustice we received.

We will continue to rise above the chaos of the mental healthcare system.

We will continue to share our wisdom from lessons learned through years of lived experience.

Our past and our present will serve as our beacon of hope for our future in a more just and inclusive society.

Lastly, we have come to realize; It is our time.

We shall continue to work our way into the rooms where decisions are made and resources are allocated. We shall continue our battle for life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. We shall continue to proclaim, “Nothing About Us Without Us.”

It is our time.