

Mental health patients learn to be advocates

By Brian Saxton

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DANBURY — "It's horrible. No matter how good it is, there are always voices in your head saying it could be better."

Scot Fritz is sitting in the living room of his basement apartment reflecting on the feelings of depression and anxiety that have haunted him since childhood.

"I tried to commit suicide when I was 17 and I've been in therapy for most of my adult life," Fritz said. "Today my mental illness is pretty well managed. I don't take drugs but I have counseling once a week."

It's not Fritz's only burden. In 1989, he was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis and lost the last real job he ever had.

Still, unwilling to stay home, Fritz, 44, has used his own experiences over the years to help fellow sufferers. Today is another milestone for him.

In a class of 11 students, Fritz is graduating from a recent Danbury-based program that taught those with psychiatric disabilities how to advocate for themselves and for others in the outside world.

The 14-week program, hosted by the Greater Danbury Mental Health Authority, was run by Advocacy Unlimited, a private, non-profit Connecticut group that assists people in recovery from mental illness.

"It makes them aware that they have rights in terms of human services and state agencies and that they can make a difference for themselves and for others," said agency director Melissa Marshall.

The agency, founded in 1994, teaches students their rights in areas such as housing discrimination, Social Security and disabilities.

This year's program was the agency's first venture into Danbury and drew students between the ages of 20 and 60.

"We had a very positive response from those who were in the course," Marshall said. "They displayed a sense of empowerment and self-esteem, which is exactly what our work is all about."

For Scot Fritz, who has worked as a volunteer for area social support groups, it was invaluable.

"People were constantly coming up to me and asking me for help because I've been through the Social Security system," Fritz said. "Although I was always able to give them advice, the classes have provided me with the resources and information I didn't have."

One of Fritz's friends, Bethel resident Carolyn Roche, is also graduating from the program.

"I think this kind of program is going to make people with psychiatric disabilities more forthcoming about what their needs and hopes are," Roche said.

Roche, 32, who is neurologically impaired, was born and raised in Bethel and graduated from Bethel High School.



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Today, Roche, who is a qualified child care worker at a Bethel day care center, is already using the skills she gained in the course to help one local client understand the

Medicare prescription drug program.

"Now I'm out in the field, I hope I can help people develop a better awareness of issues," Roche said.

Fritz, who has already been working at Walnut Hill Community Church in Bethel, plans to expand his mission there among a group of people seeking help.

Fritz cites a bumper sticker he once saw as the best description of his goal in life.

"I want to shake up the people who are comfortable," said Fritz, "and make comfortable all the people who are shook up."

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