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LOCAL

Mentally Ill Urged Not to Lose Hope

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DANBURY – Imagine a doctor trying to give you hope for recovery when the only treatment for your illness would make you "fat, bald and stupid," said psychiatrist Dr. Charles Atkins, medical director for the Western Connecticut Health Network.

That might seem laughable to many, but to the mentally ill such choices are far from funny, Atkins told some 120 people at the annual Interlude fund-raising breakfast at The Inn at Ethan Allen last week. Atkins, who is also the author of three psychological thrillers, was the keynote speaker. Interlude is a nonprofit organization that provides residential and counseling services to adults with chronic mental illness.

For those who work with the chronically mentally ill, Atkins said it is often hard to give hope for recovery because there is no cure-all pill to treat these illnesses. Yet hope is essential, he said. "To want things is a key to happiness," Atkins said.

Mental health workers and counselors need to assure their clients that recovery is a process, and allow them to make choices about their treatment, Atkins said.

Sometimes clients with mental illness engage in high-risk behaviors and have lifestyles that society deems unacceptable or undesirable, Atkins said. Yet it is critical to leave judgments at the door when trying to help the mentally ill curtail those dangerous behaviors, such as drugs and prostitution, he said.

The hope for recovery often comes in small steps, Atkins said. When a client can take back some power over his or her treatment, or a new medication offers fewer side effects than another, the chances for recovery improve, he said. But it is always a balancing act to know how much control to allow when clients are often out of control, he said.

"If a patient leaves my office feeling that there is no hope, then I've failed," Atkins said. At the breakfast, Interlude honored three individuals and five companies and their coordinators who participate in the United Way Day of Caring.

The award recipients were: Priscilla Behling, associate director of the Volunteer Center in Danbury; Nan Salamon and Dorrie Johnson, who volunteer as Friends of Interlude; and computer consultant Jay Munro. In addition, Interlude honored Boehringer-Ingelheim and its coordinator Ginger Heinlein; Meyer Jabara Hotels and coordinator Kathleen Shook; Webster Bank and coordinator Sharon DeLeo; Wal-Mart and coordinator Jennifer Strout and Emhart Teknologies and coordinator Linda Wilson.

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