

Photos capture recovery images

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Jennifer Morrison didn't have the courage to tell even people she knew that she had experienced mental illness.

Now, through words and im-



Jennifer Morrison

ages, she stands before an entire city and declares, "Yes, it happened to me, and it can happen to you, too."

Morrison was one of 10 people — one of whom had to drop out — to participate in "PhotoVoice 2009, Mental Health Recovery: Through Our Lens and Pen," sponsored by the Center of Vocational Alternatives.

COVA provides vocational rehabilitation services for people with various kinds of disabilities.

It was a local version of a global photo essay project that involves a striking role reversal: People who are more often the subject of documentary photography were the ones taking the pictures.

"I think I was impressed by the courage and the talent ..., the way people were willing to put their heart and their soul into it," said Barb Schmitzer, a 14-year COVA staff member who worked with the project's participants. "I've started looking at the world a little differently."

Alysse Gafkjen, a recent photography graduate from the Columbus College of Art and Design, provided training on the use of digital cameras that were provided by Southeast Inc. Recovery and Mental Health Services.



Chris Frenzer

Chris Frenzer, 48, who is recovering with the help of medication from 30 years in the grip of symptoms of schizophrenia,

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Photo exhibit capture images of recovery

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called PhotoVoice a "creative empowerment initiative."

Frenzer, whose symptoms are kept in check with the help of various anti-psychotic and mood-stabilizer medications, used a photo of medicine bottles atop a slot machine to represent the "hit-and-miss gamble" of finding the right combination of drugs. Pills in a martini glass represent the "cocktail" of medications that control his schizophrenia. The final shot is of Frenzer's outstretched hand. Its fingers are decorated with so-called "poison rings," hinged affairs with stones that lift up to provide enough space for a pill or two. It relates to the time Frenzer and his father were on vacation in Naples, Fla.

As they prepared to go out to dinner, Frenzer said his father raised a fuss about the Native American medication pouch hanging around his son's neck.

"What do you want to do, stand out like a neon light?" Frenzer wrote of his father's words. "Take that thing off!"

The works of Frenzer, Morrison and the others are on display at the Rhodes State Office Tower, 30 E. Broad St.

The exhibit will continue through Aug. 28.

Morrison was completely "average," she said. There was no abuse in her past, no neglect. She didn't come from a broken home. She had a master's degree in public relations and had "found the job I was meant to do," working in a downtown office tower, Morrison wrote in her essay.

Then, at age 28, symptoms of bipolar disorder began to show up,

only Morrison had no idea what was going on, no frame of reference for what was happening to her. Her memory became spotty and her sense of direction vague. The walks she used to take were out of the question; she could get lost just a few blocks from home.

A diagnosis took three years.

Morrison's first photo is of the downtown skyline, showing one of the buildings where she, like thousands of others, once worked. Next is a picture of power lines, symbolizing that time in her life when "wires came loose." A tree fallen over, its roots sticking up into the air, is the third photo.

"I wanted to get across how devastating it was, how your whole life gets turned upside down," Morrison said.

The fourth and final, hope-filled photo is of an opened rose, because for Morrison recovering from her illness is akin to "learning to blossom."

"It's been a good project and it's been a very tough project," she said, "because I had to go back through a lot of the old pain. I needed to take a risk to blossom. I spent a lot of time worried about I might regress.

"It's easier not to try."

But she did try, and participating in PhotoVoice feels like validation for having done so.

"It was like the project was made for me, and I'm sure everyone else felt that way," Morrison said. "It also helped me to realize how far I've come. I'm not sure even a year ago I'd have been able to do the project."

"I've been so impressed by the courage of these folks," said Robin Hepler, director of marketing for COVA.

"Mental Health Recovery: Through Our Lens and Pen" was made possible by the financial support of the Greater Columbus Arts Council through a grant, the cameras from Southeast Inc., facilities at CCAD and the Ohio Department of Mental Health for assisting in showcasing the exhibit.

"Because of the response we've had from the participants, we're going to redouble efforts to find the financing to do it again," Hepler said.

She added that a second exhibit of the project is being contemplated during October, which is Employer Disability Month.

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