

# ADVOCATES

First, we listen ...

*"Each of Us Is a Person First"*

*By Nan Donald, 2<sup>nd</sup> Prize Winner*

Without keeping the person first, individuals get lost behind a foreground of assumptions, preconceptions, and—all too often for those of us with psychiatric diagnoses—stigma.

There have been too many times the person I am has “disappeared” in this manner. As an identical twin, I spent years as “one of the twins”. Although no harshness or judgment fueled this phrasing, both my sister and I fumed over the lack of individuality this offered us. We knew we were more than just a package deal!

After coming out as a lesbian and fighting for equal rights, I experienced a new, more hateful way of having my individuality invalidated and my personhood ignored. I became one of “those” people and was assaulted on the basis of my sexual orientation. My assailant, I am sure, did not see me as a real person but merely as a caricature of the epithet he spat at me. I discovered that losing the person can also loose the chains of civility and common decency in the eye of the beholder.

After receiving my first psychiatric diagnosis, I learned of yet another way I could erode my identity into a single characteristic, another way I could be relegated to a one-dimensional “otherness”. Although this new label, becoming one of “the mentally ill” has not resulted in unlawful physical violence, it has done the most thorough job of erasing anything meaningful and unique from my identity to those who label and see me as a diagnosis and not as a person WITH a diagnosis. With this new identity, I was whittled down to a label, a disability, a cluster of deficits and all too often, seen as a person to be feared as violent. At summer camp as a young teenager my cabin mates all moved their bunk beds to the far side of the cabin to be a safe distance from the “crazy one”.

There is a saying in my community of persons with lived experience of psychiatric diagnoses: “If you are going to label me, please list all ingredients”. When we boil the full richness and complexity of an individual down to one trait, to a single facet of their life, we deny them their humanity. Such shortcuts cut individuals completely out of the map. In so doing, we open the way to dismissing their individual potentials, the magic spark of humanity that lies within us all.

I am so much more than my diagnosis. I have a family, a career, a spiritual practice, a musical life, civic obligations and a life that has sometimes been enriched by my psychiatric challenges. I also have experiences of surviving these challenges, and I have hope to offer to others who are also finding their way down their own personal roads of recovery.

I work hard to resist the temptations of “othering” others. It is easy to lump “the elderly, the “poor” or any other group of people who share a characteristic into one pot. But I’ve seen the dangers of these practices and how they directly damage me and my fellow peers. When we are seen as our diagnosis, medical care suffers, since our concerns are assumed to be psychiatric symptoms. Our professional lives have been sidetracked by stigma. Our rights are at constant risk of being eroded. The larger world looks at us differently. And most importantly, every time our individuality is smothered, a little piece of us dies, and that small flicker of hope grows a little dimmer.