

SEPTEMBER 19, 2007

DESTINATION DIGNITY DAY

Written by Laura Lopez

In January 2007, Dr. Steven Applewhite, Professor of Macro Methods: Community Practice at the University of Houston's Graduate College of Social Work, presented an assignment to his eager students. The assignment required the following of the students: conduct a needs assessment in a community, analyze and interpret the findings, create an intervention for the issues within that community, and finally, to implement the intervention.

The class split into small groups for the semester-long project, each one anxious to pick the communities that they would each focus on. Five of us made up the group that I was a part of, and we began approaching various agencies and organizations that would help our group ease into different communities around the city.

Nearly three months later, the same group that had at one time been excited about the project had become a group desperate for help. During the two months since the start of the semester, our group had encountered four different roadblocks with various entities in our city. The end of the semester was only five weeks away, and our group was still without a working project.

During that time, I was an intern with The Arc of Greater Houston under the supervision of Judy Kantorczyk, Executive Director, and José Ramirez, Jr., LCSW. When they learned of our group's woes, they offered the opportunity for our Macro group to do an assessment on the Mental Retardation Needs Council of Harris County (MRNC). The MRNC, which was created in 2001, is a consortium of organizations who come together to assess services for persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities. When we approached Dr. Applewhite about the offer to assess the MRNC, he was hesitant to allow our group to proceed because we would be focusing on an organization. When he learned that the MRNC members represent the intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) population and that the community of persons with IDD would ultimately benefit, he consented.

Despite our desperation for a project, my peers were hesitant to collaborate with this organization for the sole reason that started this entire campaign: stigma. Only two of the five of us had any background with persons who have intellectual and developmental disabilities, and the other three group members were literally afraid of the population due to their lack of exposure and preconceived notions. They decided to take the challenge of working with on a project with a population that they normally would not, and as one might imagine, their minds were opened during the process. By the time the project culminated, the group members who

had once been afraid of being near persons with IDD were acting as advocates for this population.

In only five weeks, the five of us interviewed fourteen members of the MRNC, analyzed and interpreted the data, and developed an intervention plan based on the findings. While the members of the MRNC brought to light many critical issues faced by persons with IDD, the issue most frequently mentioned in our interviews was stigma. Our group felt it necessary to help the MRNC combat this issue by helping to educate the general public through an anti-stigma campaign.

At the MRNC meeting in May, we proposed this intervention to the members. The idea was unanimously supported, and all members were eager to lend their personal support to see it through. At that meeting, Ken Collins, Deputy Director of MR Services at MHMRA, mentioned the statewide Destination Dignity idea. For the last thirteen years, the Governor of Texas has declared September as Destination Dignity month. During that month, each MRA across the state is encouraged to hold an activity to promote public awareness about persons with IDD and the issues that they face in society. Mr. Collins proposed that our Macro group's idea be the Destination Dignity activity. The MRNC fully supported this idea, as did the MHMRA Planning Advisory Council (PAC).

September 19, 2007 has been designated as Harris County's Destination Dignity Day. On this day, local organizations and agencies represented in the MRNC and PAC will be hosting a variety of activities throughout the county. The goal of Destination Dignity Day 2007 is for persons such as you to educate others about the hurtful stigma that persons with IDD and their families experience daily. Materials to help you relay this critical message have been made, and all who wish to participate with Destination Dignity are encouraged to use these materials. Posters, business-sized informational cards, and t-shirts (sold at cost) will be available for pick-up on September 12th, 2007 from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. at the MHMRA Conference Center, located at 7033 Southwest Freeway in Houston. Please join in our efforts to reduce stigma for persons with IDD. It is up to you and to me to spread the word that STIGMA HURTS.

For more information, please visit: <http://www.mhmraharris.org/MRSD/MR.html>