

IN THE FIELD

Using his own success to help others

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Karl Shallowhorn has flourished during the last three decades. Great marriage. Successful professional career. Wide circle of friends.

It's been a far cry from the years that followed his first psychotic episode in February 1981.

Shallowhorn was 18, struggling through his second semester at General Motors Institute, and seeking solace in alcohol and other drugs.

He and his family had no inkling that bipolar disorder was about to overpower him.

"Quite honestly, the next seven years were a blur," Shallowhorn said during a recent interview in his office at the Mental Health Association of Erie County (MHA).

His illness forced him to move from Michigan back home to Amherst with his parents, Lillie and Charles. He weathered seven hospitalizations in the behavioral health units at the former Buffalo General Hospital, Erie County Medical Center



The turning point came 30 years ago next month, when a counselor encouraged him to attend a recovery program meeting. Such meetings have been part of his wellness strategy since.

Shallowhorn, a certified alcohol and substance abuse counselor, has worked at Buffalo General Medical Center and Horizon Health Services. He has spent the past four years as director of community advocacy for both the MHA and Compeer, the latter a nonprofit that trains those who've overcome mental health challenges to mentor peers.

He will leave those posts later this month to bring the Therapy Live Prepare U program to schools across New York State. The program is designed to help students of all ages to become more aware about mental health, and how to better address mental illness.

Mental Health Association Executive Director Kenneth Houseknecht said the Mental Health First Aid and Mindset workplace mental health education programs Shallowhorn helped established will continue with those Shallowhorn helped train.

"We're not losing an employee, we're gaining an ally," Houseknecht said. What they will miss, he said, is Shallowhorn's ability to look others with mental illnesses in the eye and say, "You know what? You can have a serious, lifelong mental health

"Recovery is possible. You can get better." — Karl Shallowhorn, left, director of community advocacy with the Mental Health Association and a peer mentor with Compeer, talking with Terrance Johnson, a young man he mentors.

John Hickey/Buffalo News

challenge and still live a full, productive, happy, meaningful life, and I'm living proof of that."

Shallowhorn, 55, and his wife, Suzy, have two daughters, Sarah, 22, and Lillie, 19.

"I caused a lot of havoc in my family years ago but my parents supported me," Shallowhorn said. "I had extended family that supported me and I had some close friends who were good. I was supported, which a lot of people don't have, unfortunately."

Q. What can you do to replace that? Is there another way?

There is, and a lot of people have to go the route of peer support, reaching out to others, whether it be in recovery programs that are mental health-related or otherwise. That can be crucial. I used Peer Connection through my recovery program.

Q. What would you like people to know about the job your leaving?

Working at the MHA and Compeer has been tremendously rewarding. It far exceeded any expectations I had

when I started, especially the ability to not only grow professionally but to help people. I've been able to do the work I've been called to do. I hope to rejoin the MHA board and will continue to visit with my Compeer friend, Terrance Johnson.

Q. You say self-disclosure helps in your job.

Years ago, I just wanted to tell my story. Recovery is possible. You can get better. Once I started doing that, it was liberating to be able to say, This is who I am. I'm OK. There's nothing to be afraid of, despite what we see sometimes in movies or TV, or even on the news. Most people living with mental health challenges don't fit that profile.... In the end it's about recovery, about giving hope.

Q. What clicked for you?

First and foremost, I realized that by using drugs my mental health condition was getting worse and unless I stopped using, I couldn't get better. Also, when I stopped using, I felt better. Things became more clear and focused. I realized that I could

have a life, finally.

Q. What are some of the key steps that you've taken to address your mental health condition and the negative things that came with it?

Being linked with professional help is first and foremost. I've been very fortunate over time to have good treatment. Mind you, early on it was tough because finding the right medication was difficult, but I've had a great therapist over time. I've had the good fortune to have good psychiatrists to help me find the right medication. I still take medication. That's a big part of my recovery. Another big part is exercise. I got into that almost 20 years ago and do that regularly. I try to get good sleep. For people with bipolar disorder, sleep is really critical. I'm strong in my faith. I go to church and practice my faith regularly. Also, I have a good support system of friends and extended family. This is my tool kit.

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