

SMALL STEPS

A FILM BY MICHELLE CABALU
15-20 MIN. DIGITAL VIDEO

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Concept

Small Steps will chronicle the relationships between several job developers and their clients at The Village, a revolutionary and controversial mental health service agency. The process of rehabilitation can be emotionally and physically draining for both client and caseworker. While documenting a client's socialization into the working world, I would relate the challenges he or she faces when learning and unlearning behavior. The story will be told primarily through observational footage, interviews, and video diaries recorded by one or more subjects in the film. The members' quests for employment and self-reliance, their progress through different stages of recovery, and their changing relationships with their job developers will provide the arc for this film.

Background

Traditionally, the image of mental health institutions in this country has been one of institutions designed to keep those with serious mental illnesses in a limited stress environment that keeps them stable and more importantly, out of the way of the general public. Even in a politically correct society, where the integration of physically disabled persons into public arenas such as workplaces and movie theaters is lauded, the presence of persons with psychological disabilities in the same venues is met with intolerance, disgust, and fear.

The predominant model of mental health care is medically-based, with an emphasis on creating a treatment to alleviate symptoms of a diagnosis that usually includes medication and psychiatric counseling. Psychiatrists and clients maintain a distanced relationship, where the boundaries for the physician-client relationship and the physical place of treatment are well-defined. Approaching recovery within this framework usually creates the illusion that illnesses can be cured much like other diseases can be cured. For the chronically mentally ill, however, a "cure-all" treatment is rarely found, which often results in frustration on the part of clients and families of clients.

The Village Integrated Service Agency, located in Long Beach, California, is a mental health service agency that grew out of the complaints of a community frustrated with the California mental health system. Its philosophy differs from that of other programs insofar as the approach to rehabilitation is less reliant on clinical treatment, and more reliant on community integration as a means to recovery.

The organization offers a menu of services that "members" have a choice to access, such as personal service planning, which assists in everything from housing choices to recreational opportunities, and employment services, which assists in all aspects of job development, from helping the member shop for work clothes to making partnerships with employers to obtain jobs for members. Caseworkers go into the community with

clients and personally teach them social and professional skills that will help them function in the mainstream. At the Village, the staff encourages members to take risks in order to raise their quality of life. Additionally, the staff-client distinction is blurred to create an adult-to-adult relationship; members are free to make their own choices, including whether to take their medications or not; and members are welcome to utilize services within the Village community for as long as they wish.

Thesis Statement

Although this film centers around issues connected to mental health care and the efficacy of programs like the Village that rely on humanistic approaches for improving the lives of persons with mental illness, the broader purpose of this film is to examine the definition and process of recovery. I would like to paint a portrait of recovery, one that I expect will reflect the ups and (frequent) downs as well as risks that come with rehabilitation. This film will evaluate the word “success” as a relative term. In the Village’s philosophy, success does not necessarily mean full recovery, but can mean the smallest amount of personal growth.

This film will also address the question: “Can persons with chronic mental illness and limited social and professional skills be integrated in a mainstream environment?” With this question in mind, I will examine the Village’s employment services, because it, more than any other component of the Village’s rehabilitation plan, requires members to conform to the expectations and assumptions of those they will encounter in the working world. I would also like to examine the fine line between support and dependency that a job developer sometimes walks when working with a client.

This film will also expose the stigma associated with mental illness in this country. In the eyes of employers, acquaintances, and even clinicians, persons with mental illness become the diseases that plague them and cease to be people with abilities, desires, and goals. I intend to delve past the obvious characterizations of my subjects and examine their more subtle and complex personalities.

Treatment

The film opens with a close-up of a middle-aged man, with glasses and hair thick with pomade in the midst of what we find out later is a mock job interview. We first hear answers to basic questions: “Nice to meet you too,” “I want this job because I love animals and I have always wanted to work at a pet store,” “I’m good with dogs.” The answers are jump-cut and we don’t hear the questions that preceded them. The answers start off fine, but then we begin to hear the quality of the responses degrade a bit: “I haven’t worked for 20 years,” “I don’t want to work more than 3 hours a day, or on Wednesdays and Fridays,” “I would never take money from the cash register, only a dollar now and then, but never more than ten.”

Cut to: TITLE CARD

We then see establishing shots of the Village: members playing pool, eating lunch at the Village Café, walking down the halls. Audio from an interview with Paul Barry, Assistant Director of the Village begins over the images. He talks about the Village, and describes how it is different from the traditional mental health care model. He talks about how the employment department takes away members' safety blankets and is sometimes the first place that members are exposed to real world situations.

The interview cuts to the employment department's regular Tuesday morning meeting, where job developers sit at a round table and discuss the progress of all the Village members who are in caseloads. We are first introduced to our various job developers: Nina, Vicky, and Jose. They are discussing their current cases: Louie, who we saw earlier in the mock interview, needs a little extra work, he's just started looking for work after 20 years of unemployment, and he's not doing well in the mock interviews; Cheryl is trying hard to find a job, she has 8 kids, and is raising them with the child support she is receiving from the child's father. She desperately wants to be able to get a job to provide them with more, but hasn't been able to keep a job in recent months.

Cut to: Cheryl out shopping with her job developer for some good interview clothes. While shopping, she and her job developer argue over what she should wear, and when it comes time to purchase, Cheryl is unwilling to pay the cashier the marked price, attempting to bargain awkwardly. Such altercations exemplify the difficulty members of The Village have in situations most people take for granted.

Nina, the job developer assigned to Cheryl, now explains in an interview her progress and frustration with her client. Nina is a veteran job developer at The Village, and provides insight into the agency's unique definition of "success" for their clients. She explains that the path to recovery is taken in small steps, and that few of The Village's members are expected to hold down their first jobs for very long.

Still, there are successes. One of them is Bobby, who after two years of work cleaning trash on city streets, now supervises a team of twelve street cleaners. As he is described, we see Bobby working diligently and confidently managing his staff. Then, in a short interview, Bobby relates his motivations for working so hard, and tells of his long-term goals. We see that despite having experienced difficulty assimilating into a daunting and often unaccepting new world, Bobby is a highly-thoughtful individual with normal ambitions and aspirations.

Now we return to Louie and Vicky, his job developer, enthusiastically discussing what types of jobs he would prefer. In video diary footage, Louie explains to us some misgivings about certain types of jobs that he has not revealed to Vicky.

Cut to: Vicky walking her beat of fast-food restaurants and retail stores in search of job openings for Louie. We see snippets of meetings with store managers in which Vicky employs careful wording to portray The Village as a reputable but rather run-of-the-mill employment agency. We witness a range of responses from potential employers, mostly unfavorable. But in the end she is encouraged by an opening for a

cashier at a chain restaurant. She informs Louie of the opportunity and they decide to pursue it. She has one week to prepare him for the interview.

In the second act of the film, we follow Vicky preparing Louie for job-readiness. They shop for clothes, fix up his resume, discuss dos and don'ts for being interviewed. In another mock-interview, this time specifically for the cashier job, Louie performs much better. Again in his video diary, Louie expresses apprehension as well as enthusiasm as the interview day approaches.

The day of the interview. We accompany Vicky to Louie's apartment where she is to pick him up and take him to the interview site. He is not on schedule. In the car, as she provides him with last-minute tips, his attitude is negative. It seems his apprehension has taken him over, or, perhaps, it is just not one of his good days. After Vicky drops Louie off, we wait with her in the car where she vents frustration, but tries to remain positive.

The expression on Louie's face upon his return indicates his satisfaction or dissatisfaction with his performance in the interview. A phone call from the employer a few days later provides the climax of the film.

Audience/Distribution

This film is targeted at an audience that may not be exposed to the mental health community as well as the mental health community at large, which includes the mentally disabled, clinicians, administrators, social workers, and family of the mentally disabled. Initially, the piece will be distributed through the festival circuit, with the intention of later acquiring television distribution. Videotape distribution would target mental health care institutions, and college-level educational avenues.