

Lyceum lecturer to talk about criminalization of mentally ill, Tuesday

Community not immune to mental health issues

[J.R. Ortega](#) • Originally published November 11, 2010 at 5:21 p.m., updated November 11, 2010 at 11:10 p.m.

Pete Earley's son's brush with the law because of bipolar disorder is just half the story the New York Times best-selling author wants to talk about at Tuesday's lyceum lecture series at Victoria College.

Earley's book, "Crazy," chronicles his family's experience with his son's disorder and his investigation into the criminalization of the mentally ill, a trend being felt in Victoria and across the U.S.

"Cutting programs can actually cost a community more in tax dollars," Earley said in an e-mail. "Why? Because persons with untreated mental disorders aren't going to get any better if they don't get treatment. Many of them are going to end up homeless or in jails and prisons. Taxpayers will be stuck paying for them one way or another."

Earley, a former investigative journalist for the Washington Post, has written 11 books about crime and punishment and was invited to speak by Victoria College and Gulf Bend Center.

The issues Earley will bring are important to Victoria, especially in the midst of Texas' 82nd legislative session, said Don Polzin, Gulf Bend executive director.

"As far as I'm concerned, if somebody thinks they are immune to this, they're wrong," Polzin said, adding that one in five will have a mental disorder in their lifetime. "It doesn't discriminate."

Texas faces a climbing several billion dollar deficit and because of the shortfall, mental health services will more than likely take a back seat, he said.

"Something is going to be taken away," he said.

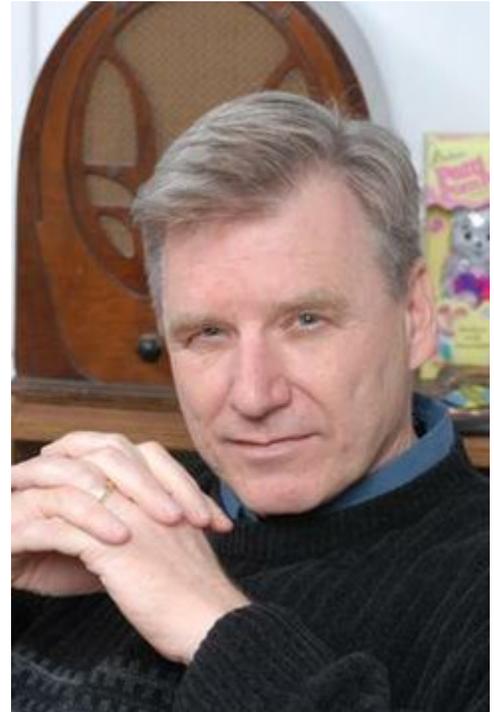
Polzin has read "Crazy" and met Earley.

Earley has a great concern as a father of a mentally ill son and as a citizen who believes in the importance of mental health services, Polzin said.

Gulf Bend and area law enforcement have worked toward not criminalizing those with mental illnesses through jail diversion for several years.

Too often, a person is driven by mental illness to commit a crime and is held in jail without any treatment, Polzin said.

Bruce Kaiser, who sits on the board of the National Alliance on Mental Illness chapter - Victoria, has a family member who suffers from schizophrenia.



The words written in Earley's book are relatable and hold truth for Kaiser.

"It's very fitting and timely given the situation the mentally ill are in, in Victoria," Kaiser said. "The general public is not real knowledgeable about mental illness."

Earley still remembers not fully understanding the mental health community.

"The only time I thought about mental illness is when I ran into someone who was homeless screaming on a D.C. sidewalk. I figured he was a bum," he said. "And then my son became that psychotic screaming man and I learned that mental disorders can hit anyone, any family."