

## Journalist shares experiences with son's mental illness

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On Tuesday, journalist Pete Earley will visit Victoria as the second speaker in the Victoria College 2010-11 Lyceum lecture series. This free event, held in the Fine Arts Auditorium beginning at 7:30 p.m., is sponsored by the Gulf Bend Center in Victoria in honor of its 40th anniversary as a community health center.

Earley, an award-winning journalist, has devoted many years to investigating a major social problem in America. He writes and speaks passionately about a decades-long trend that in effect has criminalized mental illness in this country, resulting in an increasingly desperate class of citizens, by most accounts numbering in the hundreds of thousands of individuals, whom our society has forgotten.

Earley has both professional and personal knowledge of the plight of this dispossessed group. His book "Crazy: A Father's Search Through America's Mental Health Madness," relates the story of his son, Mike, who experienced a psychotic break while in the waning days of his college undergraduate years in the 1990s. Earley struggled to help Mike deal with his illness, including trying to convince his son to take needed medication and to get him the treatment he needed. Despite the father's best efforts, Mike repeatedly went off his meds because, characteristically of the mentally ill, he felt they were no longer necessary once he was feeling better and his thought processes normalized.

Predictably, after one such lapse, he was caught breaking into a neighborhood home while delusional. The encounter with the justice system that ensued was so humiliating and debilitating, financially and emotionally, that it motivated the author to investigate the treatment of the mentally ill in this country and to ultimately become an advocate for mental health reform. He chose the city of Miami to focus his investigation as representative of how big cities in America deal with this intractable problem.

Earley's book alternates between Mike's story and the author's Miami experience, and puts a human and personal face on the plight of those afflicted with this awful disease. Along the way, he provides eye-opening facts and some recent history to explain why the mentally ill have it much worse today in the streets, jails and courtrooms of America than 50 years ago when they were routinely housed in state hospitals.

He tells the personal stories of numerous individuals - the afflicted and the jailers, government officials, police, judges, social workers and others charged with either helping or dealing with them.

These are heart-wrenching stories of lives gone awry through no individual fault. Earley adamantly points out that mental illness is caused by a chemical imbalance in the brain and is not a character defect. It is not a crime to be ill although sufferers, many of whom live on the streets, routinely encounter the police because of actions caused by their disability. While Earley indicts our society for its seeming inability to rectify the problem, he also celebrates the dedicated, even heroic, individuals in Miami, representative of others throughout the nation, such as the people at Gulf Bend, who are advocates for the mentally ill, and work every day to help make their lives better.

The roots of the current situation, in which mentally ill individuals who live on the streets run afoul of the law because of their disorder, are jailed, held for a time, often in deplorable conditions and then released, only to repeat this routine in an endless cycle, is an unintended consequence of the Civil Rights Movement.

Prior to the 1960s, most mentally ill individuals lived in state hospitals, called asylums, where they received treatment and, at the very least, had food and shelter. Earley discusses several events during the 1960s, including the Kennedy administration's mental health initiative, the development of the anti-psychotic drug Thorazine, which was initially seen as a miracle drug, but eventually found to have severe side effects, and pop culture phenomena such as the movie "One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest," all contributing to a scrutiny and eventual condemnation of asylums.

By the 1970s, a deinstitutionalization movement was in full force. Legislatures throughout the country closed their state's hospitals, Congress passed laws that funded disability payments for the mentally ill and those afflicted were set free in droves, only to appear on streets in cities throughout America. Eventually, federal funding began drying up, and from the street corner to the jail became a revolving door. Earley notes that on an average day, 700 inmates in the city of Miami jail are on anti-psychotic medicine. They receive very little else in the way of help or treatment programs. In an editorial written several years back, the New York Times called deinstitutionalization an "unmitigated social disaster" and a "cruel embarrassment."

Civil rights laws, public defenders, who routinely represent the mentally ill in court, and whose sole charge is to get them set free and back on the streets, and HIPAA laws are all culprits in exacerbating the situation. Police usually are not trained to deal with psychotic individuals although some cities, including Miami, have implemented programs to change this. Involuntary commitment to hospitals is all but impossible in this country with the current law.

The crux of the problem, in Earley's view, is the terrible stigma against mental illness, and the propensity of people to react to the mentally ill with fear. Jails are not safe and humane places to house the afflicted, but there is often no other place for them to go.

Studies have shown that as many as 50 percent of the chronically homeless in our nation have psychiatric disorders.

What began as a well-intentioned effort to preserve their rights, has tragically backfired.

Please plan on attending the Lyceum lecture to hear Pete Earley's fascinating account of his experiences with mental health in America and his ideas for reforming a broken system.

Dave Tysen is The Victoria College Lyceum chairman.