

Compassion, Tolerance Are What Make Cottage Grove Special

By the South Lane Mental Health Board of Directors

Cottage Grove, for those of us who have chosen to call this small city our home, is a special community in so many ways. We are blessed with spectacular surroundings, a rich history, and a full complement of amenities.

But really, it is the people who live here that make our town so unique. We are a diverse community with a wide spectrum of beliefs and backgrounds. We tolerate our differences and celebrate our common interests. And we hold a deep collective spirit of caring about each other as evidenced in the variety of heart-warming stories (many featured in the local media) of compassion and generosity afforded to those who find themselves in need of a helping hand.

Along these lines, one very touching aspect of our town is its ready acceptance and support of our community members who appear to have mental health issues. While it is sometimes easy to make assumptions about a person's state of mind based on a quirky appearance, whether or not they are talking to themselves or behaving oddly but benignly, we do not assume these folks are a threat. Rather, we are proud that we have created a community where everyone feels comfortable and welcome enough to participate in civic affairs, go shopping, walk down the street, or just sit in a park or on a Main Street bench.

Nationwide, and in Oregon, the trend in mental health care over recent years has been to enable many with severe and persistent mental illness to live in their communities, rather than be confined in a mental hospital. Not only does this save taxpayer dollars but it also results in better quality of life for the individual and a richer community fabric. This approach is a reflection of our belief that we do not have a right to sequester people simply because they have a mental ailment and behave differently from others. Because of this, the state's secure mental hospital in Salem is increasingly reserved for those with mental health issues who have also committed serious crimes or pose a danger to themselves or others.

As the Cottage Grove area's prime mental health agency, South Lane Mental Health is closely involved with many local residents who experience mental health and emotional problems. The agency's clients include a few, but by no means all, of the more visibly mentally ill folks one might see out and about in Cottage Grove.

The vast majority of South Lane Mental Health's clients are largely indistinguishable from your friends, neighbors or your colleagues at work. This is not surprising given that each year, one out of every four adults and one out of every five children will suffer from a diagnosable mental health disorder, according to the National Institute of Mental Health.

It is also important to point out that South Lane Mental Health provides counseling, medication management, crisis intervention and other services only to those who voluntarily ask for it. We don't have the legal authority — nor would we wish to have it — to force people to come see us for treatment.

Many of our clients have chronic mental challenges — depression, anxiety, bi-polar disorder, to name a few — that with appropriate counseling and sometimes medication, can be treated.

Other clients come to us because they have encountered difficult crises — the death of a loved one, for example, or emotional strife or anger among family members.

South Lane Mental Health's clients also include children whose home life has been affected by emotional or mental health problems.

We are especially grateful that Cottage Grove has an agency that helps with these matters. Families with a mentally ill household member typically feel overwhelmed by the illness and have little idea about what they can or should do to care for the individual. South Lane Mental Health's professional help enables people with temporary emotional crises as well as people with chronic mental illness — and their families — to strive for happy and productive lives.

It was the spirit of compassion for a mentally ill woman by a group of Cottage Grove residents attending the First Presbyterian Church that launched South Lane Mental Health 21 years ago. During the past two decades, as the stigma of mental illness and mental stress have lessened, more and more people have sought help. In turn, South Lane Mental Health has grown to meet our community's increasing demand for its counseling and other mental health services. Our latest expansion involves renovating and moving into a former medical clinic on Birch Avenue.

As part of this process, South Lane Mental Health, which has in the past gone quietly about its business of assistance, is seeking to bring more attention to mental health issues. With public discourse on the subject, we hope to encourage the current trend toward understanding that mental health problems are nothing to be ashamed of. Mental health conditions are as much a part of the human condition as diabetes, cancer or heart disease, every bit as complicated and challenging to deal with, and certainly every bit as worthwhile to focus on.

To help support our efforts, please join us on July 25th from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. for the **Town & Country Gardens Tour: *Beauty, Blooms & Bounty in Cottage Grove***. For more information check www.cottagegrovegardentour.org and watch the Sentinel for more details. Proceeds from the tour, which are doubled as a result of a matching grant, will benefit South Lane Mental Health clients.

South Lane Mental Health is here to help all members of our community deal with mental health issues. To learn more, please visit our website at www.slmh.org or contact any one of us board members listed below.

The South Lane Mental Health Board of Directors consists of Wonlyn Chapman, Gail Hoelzle, Bill Trotter, Grace Olson, Lauren Fuller, Kevin McNamara, Steve Lasky, Alan Baas, Jim Kness, and Virgil Miller.