



NEWS

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Consumers Fred and Irma Hubbard Succeed Individually and Together



Erma and Fred Hubbard

AUBURN – Who ever said two individuals with mental health illnesses couldn't succeed as individuals or, better yet, fall in love and achieve even greater success as a married couple?

Skeptics of the world, meet Fred and Erma Hubbard.

A native of Cato, N.Y., Fred's mental illness brought him in December 1989 to Unity House's Mental Health Services' Supervised Community Residence program at 108 South Street in Auburn, where he lived and was cared for over a nine month period. His adherence to the program and tireless support of other program participants led to his graduation to the agency's Mental Health Services' Certified Apartments program, an independent living format more suitable to his improved status. Just two years later, because of his progress in the Certified Apartments program, Fred accessed the agency's Mental Health Services Independent Housing program and occupied his own living quarters at Oak Creek Apartments off of Quill Avenue in Auburn. As one of 58 consumers currently in that Unity House program, he receives case management services and other supports, such as assistance managing his financial affairs.

Like Fred, Erma Hubbard, who hails from the Fairhaven, N.Y., area, came to Unity House for help with her mental illness. Also a graduate of the agency's Certified Apartments program,

Erma progressed to the Independent Housing program in 1997. It was while attending the Cayuga County Mental Health Department's New Beginnings Psycho-Social Club in 1994 when it was on Market Street in Auburn that she met Fred. Their friendship quickly flourished into dating, Fred says.

"We met and became friends pretty fast," he laughs. "Then we realized something more was going on between us, so we started to date. We got married on November 2, 1997 and here we are now, a little over 11 years later, still going strong as individuals and a couple."

"It's not just what Fred and Erma have accomplished individually in coming to terms with their illnesses and doing so well with the treatment and care they've received," observes Judy Fisher, manager of Unity House's Independent Housing program. "It's also all they have done since becoming independent and marrying and living together, as well as enduring all those challenges we all encounter in relationships."

Fisher in part was undoubtedly referring to the remarkable efforts the Hibbards have made on behalf of other individuals living with mental illness in the community.

Fred has presented numerous workshops throughout New York State's central region on topics related to self-help and recovery. In 2004, the local peer-run group recognized him for his commitment and dedication to the mental health consumer movement. In 2006, he started the first peer support group for consumers with mental illness in the Auburn area. And on November 7 of this year, at the Central New York Self-Help and Advocacy Council (SHAC) conference at the Holiday Inn in Auburn, he and Irma presented a workshop on marriage and mental illness. Currently, Fred is the lead facilitator for the Peer-to-Peer support group, which meets weekly at his Oak Creek apartment home.

“Folks like Erma and me with mental illnesses get together and support each other with all that’s going on in our lives,” smiles Fred, who readily acknowledges the benefits of the peer advocacy training he has received from Independent Housing senior counselor Cindy Gibson. “We’ve had as many as 13 at one meeting and as few as two. We know how important it is to have someone who has an illness to help some one else with the same challenges. It’s different and seems to help more if you have a mental illness and need help and get it from some one else who also has that illness and had the same problem and got through it.”

Illustrating the importance of individuals with mental illness having each other for support and direction, Fred recounts the time the support group aided a community member by expediting her admission to an inpatient mental health facility as she experienced borderline suicidality.

“We stuck with her and helped her get inpatient help,” he proudly says. “At the hospital when she was being admitted, we were able to converse pretty well about her illness with the admitting doctor who was impressed with what we knew about her problem. The doctor thought we were social workers! Any way, it helps that we walked the walk *and* talked the talk. The person we helped calls us her little angels.”

Not to be outdone by her husband, Erma in 2007 started the community’s Peer-to-Peer support group for women, which has been meeting every other Saturday at noon also in her and Fred’s Oak Creek apartment. It addresses the needs of women in the local and regional mental health systems by providing a safe, supportive, and confidential environment for women to share their feelings, fears, and issues.

“We usually get three to four women attending,” said Erma, who, too, counts Cindy Gibson as a mentor and friend. “Women’s needs are different from men’s, especially when it comes to mental illness and help for it. We have different perspectives and different issues.”

Gibson says the Hubbards’ peer counseling training was integral to their continuing recoveries and to what they themselves have accomplished in organizing and running peer support groups to date.

“Fred and Erma both took our six week peer counseling training courses,” she says. “They learned active listening, assertiveness, self-advocacy, some very basic crisis intervention, and some communication skills and have really, really put them to extraordinary use. The fact that they were and are so dedicated to recovery helped them in this training. They have been incredible helping peers with mental illnesses who also want to recover.”

The Hubbards, who still attend the four-day-a-week New Beginnings Psycho-Social Club now run out of the county mental health department’s day treatment clinic on North Street in Auburn, are very invested in the nonprofit organization S.A.F.I.R.E., an acronym for Self-Advocating Force Instructing Recovery and Empowerment. Established in 2002 by a group of mental health consumers with \$350.00 in ‘seed money’ from SHAC of Central New York, S.A.F.I.R.E. embraces the concepts of self-education about one’s mental illness, seeking assistance from those who have similar illnesses and have learned to live and grow with them, and recovering to live one’s life to the fullest possible extent. The organization offers peer support groups, advocacy, linkage to services, training, peer counseling, and mentoring to individuals with mental illness seeking help. It also features a Speaker’s Bureau among its services, all of which are free.

Fred and Erma remain dedicated to their individual recoveries and know doing so is key to helping others. Erma says her overall goal is to continue helping and supporting others with mental illness. In addition, she says, once her asthma becomes more manageable, she would like to return to work and maintain steady employment.

Fred, too, is interested in obtaining employment as part of continuing his recovery. He hopes to work part-time for ten to 15 hours a week. He just started in Unity House's Intensive Psychiatric Rehabilitation Treatment (IPRT) program and is confident it will help in this regard.

"It's very self-help oriented and I love that about it," he says. "The director Susan Sloan thinks maybe I can progress to finishing it in eight months or so. I'm going to IPRT because stress has always been my enemy and the program can help me cope with it and beat it. Then, I'll be better able to handle all the challenges a job presents."

When asked how they have succeeded so well through the years in their recoveries as well as their marriage, Fred and Erma grin at each other and agree compromise is the answer.

"We always return to the same thing," laughs Erma. "Give and take. It just doesn't work for us any other way."