

WORKING LIKE CRAZY

Working Like Crazy is a fresh look at the struggles and victories of some former mental health patients who work in businesses owned and run by other psychiatric survivors. Labelled "unemployable," they have given themselves a safe space among peers. A place where they can earn an income and rebuild their lives.



Laurie spent years in psychiatric isolation and now runs a courier business; Diana has transformed rage and family violence into work for the Ontario Council of Alternative Businesses; since

Graham has a job at Fresh Start Cleaning, his plan is "to get back to being a man"; now that Susan works as a courier, she can afford to care for her pets – and the neighbourhood kids don't think she's so crazy anymore. Illuminating the tears and laughter, the isolation and friendship, the rejection and acceptance, these and other stories reveal a rare glimpse of this complex community.

Working Like Crazy is about alternatives to conventional community mental health and economic development. It portrays work as a human process that rebuilds people's connections with each other. In the end, this is a film about hope.

Directors: Gwynne Basen, Laura Sky
Producers: Adam Symansky (NFB),
Gwynne Basen and Laura Sky (Skyworks)

A co-production of the National Film Board and Skyworks Charitable Foundation in association with TV Ontario, with the participation of the Ontario Council of Alternative Businesses, Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care, the Centre for Addictions and Mental Health, and the Trillium Foundation.

54 minutes, 25 seconds
Order number: C9199 228



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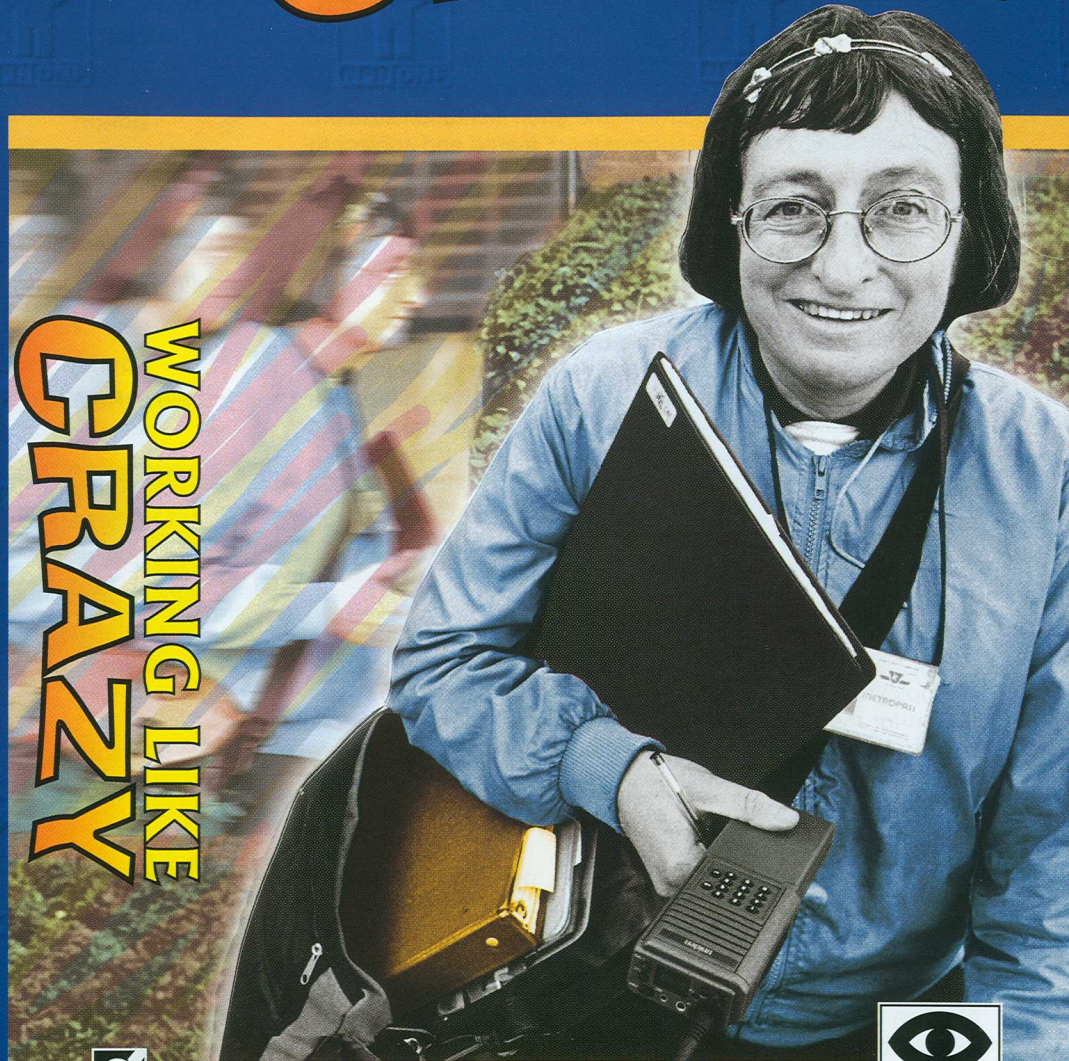
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WORKING LIKE CRAZY

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WORKING LIKE
CRAZY



VHS

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INFORMATION AND DISCUSSION GUIDE

Working Like Crazy documents the lives of six employees of alternative businesses located in Toronto. These enterprises are run and staffed by people who have been diagnosed as “mentally ill.”

Psychiatric survivor communities are varied and complex. Opinion on psychiatric treatment ranges from support for established practices to support for abolishing the existing system. Members share in common the alienating process of assessment, diagnosis, treatment and often institutionalization. Psychiatric survivors are misunderstood, feared and subject to low expectations from the general public. They are often poor and inadequately housed or homeless. The estimated rate of unemployment for this group is 85%.

Ten questions people ask

1. How do psychiatric survivor businesses get started?

An essential first step is to find or form a group of people who have been through the psychiatric treatment system. Members then meet and talk (sometimes over a period of years), find out about each other's skills and decide together how to proceed. As they confront and solve the problems of business development, they gradually acquire a sense of community. It is this sense of community that enables people to make significant changes in other areas of their lives.

2. Who can work in these businesses?

These businesses were created to employ psychiatric survivors, particularly those who were classified as “permanently unemployable” as well as “mentally ill.” The companies do not screen for the most skilled and experienced. Most take applications on a first-come, first-served basis. Currently, there are long waiting lists caused by tremendous need and inadequate resources.

3. Is the work full-time?

Survivor businesses provide primarily permanent part-time jobs. Employees support themselves with both earned income and social assistance (general welfare or public disability pensions). In Ontario, for example, people on welfare/disability pension are allowed to earn only \$160 before they face deductions on their earnings of 75 cents on every dollar. If someone in this situation is making \$10 per hour, he/she has reached their limit after only 16 hours of work. Despite this disincentive, some employees work full-time just to keep active.

Directors:

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Camera:

Jim Aquila, CSC

Sound:

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Producers:

*Adam Symansky
(NFB),
Gwynne Basen &
Laura Sky
(Skyworks)*

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4. If these employees want to work more, why don't they just come off their benefits?

Some do. But, in Ontario, one benefit of the provincial disability pension is a drug card that pays for prescription medications. Many of the people who work in survivor businesses take psychiatric medications on a long-term basis and some of these drugs are very expensive. For example, Olanzapine, an anti-psychotic drug, costs \$422 per month. If employees work enough hours to come off their pension, they lose the drug card that covers the cost of these medications. If they then become ill, it could take a full year to get back on benefits. Fear of this situation keeps most survivors from going it alone.

5. Who runs these businesses?

Survivor businesses are run by the people who work in them. In addition to their income, employees learn to become decision-makers through membership on boards and committees. For example, five members of the ten-person board at A-Way Express are employees. The management team is comprised of employees in key positions; full staff meetings are held once a month. This enables the kind of democratic participation that was stripped away from people through psychiatric treatment.

6. How do the businesses deal with the special needs and life experience of their employees?

In some ways, the needs of these employees are no more “special” than those of any other worker. However, flexible work hours are of particular importance. Most survivor businesses are organized to give time off to employees who request it without threat of job loss and without judging the employee irresponsible; planned absenteeism is not encouraged, but it is accepted. By modifying their work hours, taking chunks of time when needed, or picking their best hours to work, survivors can work and take care of themselves.

7. Is there a role for mental health professionals?

Survivor businesses do not employ professionals for skills assessments, job skills training, or clinical/therapeutic services. Instead, the businesses rely on peer training and support; teaching is an ongoing, hands-on process among employees. Service providers and members of the general public contribute their expertise as consultants or board members but rarely as staff.

8. How are the businesses funded?

Survivor businesses operate using a combination of public dollars and employee generated revenues. In Ontario, grant moneys from the Ministry of Health cover core administrative expenses while employees generate the revenue to pay their own salaries. Last year, for example, couriers who work at A-Way Express earned \$135,000 in revenue for the company.

9. If these are real businesses, why aren't they self-sufficient?

What is self-sufficient? Survivor businesses cost the Ministry of Health less than other community initiatives and certainly less than institutional services. Using conservative numbers, the estimated savings are roughly \$13,000 per survivor per year. That adds up to big savings for the system. Large businesses such as Air Canada, the Royal Bank or Bombardier are very costly to maintain as well!

10. Are these businesses successful?

Yes, but on their own terms. Financial profits and improvement in the general functioning of their employees are not necessarily the bottom line. Survivor businesses are also concerned with number of work hours created, number of employees involved in the business and the ability of these employees to sustain employment over time. They are concerned with mobilizing and empowering the survivor community through learning, participation and relationship. Success is a sense of ownership, a voice in making decisions.

Suggestions for policy makers

- Increase the amount of funding allocated to survivor business development.
- Provide education and training for consumers/survivors so that they can take up new roles developing survivor businesses.
- Provide education and training for mental health professionals so that they can become more effective partners in support of these initiatives.
- Institute a public education campaign to reduce stigma and discrimination.
- Reduce the disincentives to work by raising the limits on allowable earnings for people on disability pensions.
- Institute a graduated claw-back on earnings over the allowable earnings limits to replace the current 75% level.

Web sites

- Psychiatric Survivor Action Association of Ontario www.icomm.ca/psaao/psaao.htm
- A-Way Express www.icomm.ca/away
- Queen Street Patients Council www.icomm.ca/patientsco
- Consumer/Survivor Information Resource Centre of Toronto www.icomm.ca/csinfo To receive the Centre's bi-weekly bulletin by e-mail, send a message to majordomo@icomm.ca
- Community Legal Education Ontario (CLEO). www.cleo.on.ca
- Advocacy Resource Centre for the Handicapped (ARCH) www.indie.ca/arch/odspareg.htm
- Council of Canadians with Disabilities www.pcs.mb.ca/~ccd

Recommended readings

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