

Schizophrenic advocate earns centennial award: Austin Mardon recognized for mental-illness education

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If it wasn't for his illness, Austin Mardon might be in the middle of an academic career in geography.

If it wasn't for his illness, Mardon probably would not have put on so much weight.

If it wasn't for his illness, he might be married, own a house and have a family instead of just getting by on his AISH income of about \$12,000 per year.

But Mardon, 43, is not bitter about the path his life has taken since his struggle with schizophrenia started 13 years ago.

He has taken the hand dealt to him and made the best of it, devoting his life to educating the public about this disease and to educating people with schizophrenia about looking after themselves.

"My life has been both cursed and blessed," Mardon says. "I'm cursed with schizophrenia, but I'm blessed to be able to realize that I have schizophrenia and that I have to obey the doctor's orders."

When he had his first psychotic episode, which involved delusions of confronting Star Wars characters in the Library bar, he refused to take his meds. He didn't want to experience the side-effects, including a feeling of haziness, sexual and weight problems and severe constipation. He relented when his father travelled up from Lethbridge and missed taking the drugs only twice in the past 13 years.

He has given more than 150 speeches about the illness to thousands of people and has been a convincing advocate for people suffering from this disease. "I feel my potential hasn't been reached and I feel that I have to contribute to society."

Mardon recently received an Alberta Centennial Award for his efforts and he deserves it, according to Colin Simpson, executive director of the Edmonton chapter off the Schizophrenia Society of Alberta.

"He puts his fears aside," Simpson said. "By being a living example of hope of somebody who embraces recovery, he makes the best of his life and gives a lot of people hope. He not only tells people it's safe to talk about mental illness, but that there's no shame in speaking out."

Schizophrenia didn't hit Mardon until his late 20s and before then his life held an extraordinary amount of promise.

He was an ambitious young geographer and at the age of 24 he managed to join an international expedition to Antarctica where he spent two months on a research team looking at meteors. He describes it as a gruelling experience, buffeted by relentless winds and working very long hours, unless the weather turned nasty, in which case he would be holed up in a tent.

He says he suffered post-traumatic stress disorder and more problems surfaced during a 1991 trip to Moscow, when he was lobbying to get on another mission to Antarctica.

He was questioned by Soviet intelligence officials, possibly for his knowledge about the NORAD radar system. Accounts written in The Journal in 1992 confirm he was questioned, but some of his claims, such as an attempt on his life using gas, could not be confirmed. Whatever happened during those four days in Moscow, it led to another case of post-traumatic stress disorder, and by 1992 he was diagnosed with schizophrenia and his life changed.

That life has its limits and he accepts them.

He had a part-time job with the Canadian Mental Health Association, which he quit on the advice of his doctor. People with this illness have little tolerance for stress and there is a high risk of getting sick for schizophrenics who try to work full time, or even part time. He also requires a lot of sleep because of the drugs he has to take.

But it doesn't prevent him from being a relentless crusader to get schizophrenics to take their meds.

He has written a short paper which has been distributed to all Catholic churches by the archdiocese advising priests to be aware of parishioners who go off their medication and to encourage them to start taking them again, or at least talk to their doctor.

The issue of compulsory treatment was raised during the fatality inquiry into the death of Spruce Grove RCMP Cpl. Jim Galloway, who was shot by a delusional Martin Ostopovich, who then shot himself.

During the inquiry, Ostopovich's wife testified that he took his medicine "on and off. Mostly off."

The inquiry raised the issue about compulsory treatment orders, which Mardon supports.

This would not only prevent more tragedies like the Galloway incident, but also prevent the violence committed by psychotic people against themselves, which is much more common.

"I believe the civic duty of a person with schizophrenia is to take their medication," Mardon says.

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