



# BRAINSTORM

*Everything you don't know*

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## EDITOR'S NOTE

by Phil Glosserman

Straight from the streets and the heart of Santa Monica, *Brainstorm* brings you "everything you don't know." The writers are members of Step Up on Second, the city's leading resource for people living with mental illness, and they are all amazing.

In this issue, we focus on work. When someone has a mental illness, getting and keeping a job presents a host of challenges. Many want to work, but can't find suitable employment. Because of their illness, many people lack a work history, skills, or education. The demands and stress of a normal work environment may be too much for some. Many employers are reluctant to hire someone with a mental illness. There are no easy answers or solutions, but as you will see, the desire to work and be productive lives on.

*Phil Glosserman is a member of Step Up's Board of Directors and is Brainstorm's advisor and editor.*

## REACTIONS

*To comment on Brainstorm or to receive future issues by e-mail, please write us at [brainstorm@mail.org](mailto:brainstorm@mail.org).*

## Diamonds in the Rough

by Sarah

I've been out of work for years now. Despite my intense desire to work, mental illness has made it difficult for me to hold any job for long. I am highly intelligent, talented, capable, and educated—I have a Masters degree from a prestigious university. At every job I've tried, my employers sensed something was different about me, and found a way to get rid of me. Every time I was let go, it was heartbreaking, even from the menial jobs that paid next to nothing.

In my view, work is an essential part of recovery. It contributes to our healing and self-esteem. When I think about work, employment helped me structure my day. I felt that my activities had purpose. I had goals that required me to work closely with others. I developed strong bonds and shared experiences with my coworkers. I strived to do better each day, and I achieved a lot. I received praise from people I respected and I could confidently talk about myself to others, feeling proud of what I did and the difference that I made. People looked up to me.

Now all of that is gone. Due to my chronic unemployment, I frequently feel rejected and excluded from society. I have become socially evasive, not wanting to speak about myself for fear of being harshly judged. I constantly fear that my potential has been wasted, and that my life will never amount to much.

Many of us in the process of recovery from mental illness are actively seeking employment. So much healing would be gained if we were to become employed. For some, work might be a quarter-time job doing simple menial tasks. Most vocational programs are designed to help us achieve this level of employment. Others are suited to more intellectual

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## STEP UP ON SECOND

Step Up on Second provides effective, compassionate services for individuals in our communities who have a mental illness. Our nationally-recognized program focuses on long-term strategies and daily support services to help our members receive treatment for their brain disorders, and achieve greater independence in their lives.

*Step Up on Second, 1328 Second St., Santa Monica, CA 90401*

*For information, go to [www.StepUpOnSecond.org](http://www.StepUpOnSecond.org) or call (310) 394-6889*

# My Dream Is Coming True

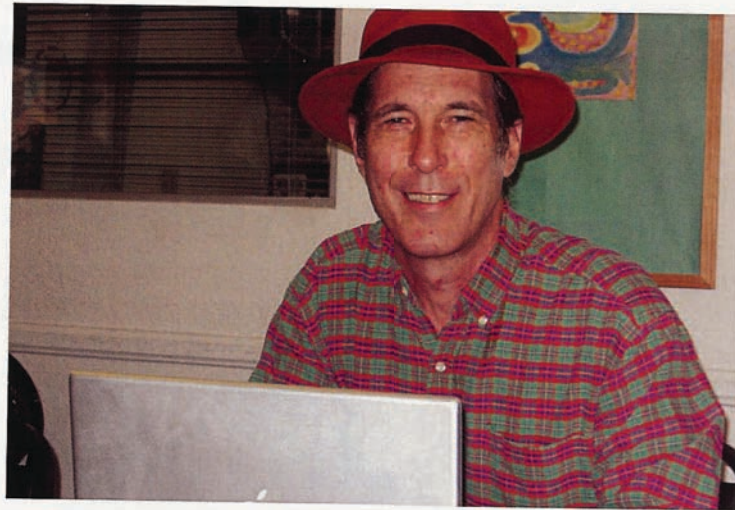
by Les Jones

Many of us who are living with mental illness have a quandary: we want to work, but because our illness may have interrupted our schooling or employment, we simply haven't acquired the skills we need to be relevant or employable in today's job market.

Most job-training programs for those with mental illness are designed to prepare us for low-level menial jobs. These programs are great for some people, and I'm all for any measures designed to help us gain employment and independence. But in my opinion, there's a huge hole that needs to be filled.

There's a common misunderstanding that people with mental illness are lacking in intelligence and incapable of working at skilled jobs. The truth is: mental illness has absolutely nothing to do with intelligence. Many of us are highly intelligent and some are quite brilliant. With the proper education and training, we can become valuable members of the workforce in the information age.

Over the years people dealing with mental illness felt they couldn't move up in the world. Many believed they couldn't learn something new that would enhance their life. Others wanted to learn new things, but the traditional classroom



was difficult to adjust to. But recent developments in computer-based training have changed that.

Five years ago, I began to dream of a place where people living with mental illness could learn the computer skills they need to advance in the workplace. I dreamed of a place where a student could sit in front of a PC, with a pair of headphones and the software of a course of study. They could learn in their own time in the way that most benefits

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# Faith

By Mike Gutowski



Work is a four-letter word. Some feel it's a dirty word. My ex-girlfriend once told me: "Work is the curse of the drinking class." But is work really a curse?

I talked to a priest about this many years ago and he told me that work is actually meant to be a blessing. I've tried to keep this thought in mind, but it isn't always easy.

I've had many jobs. I'm amazed each time I get a job and am able to keep it and even enjoy and excel at it. I say this because most of my life I have had a battle with severe depression. I know I'm not "normal," and in most work environments there is pressure to conform and be normal. It isn't easy trying to be normal when all around me I feel that others are judging me and criticizing my work and my behavior. This is why I've have had so many jobs.

I have seen many psychiatrists and therapists and have tried many different medications, all in trying to be able to hold down a job—to live a "normal life" in this world.

What keeps me going is faith. It takes a lot of faith and courage to live in a world where I don't feel normal. It takes a

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# Waiting for a Living

by Daniel Concharty

I was a waiter, waiting for life to happen  
Twelve years at Hell's Gate  
I worked for an abomination, scared to  
death by the specter of termination

I was a sycophant, sick of it  
I cried on a regular basis, the basis: just to survive  
For a 9 to 5, a high 5, then wash my tears and go to bed

Mental illness, like water, seeks its own level  
How hard I worked to clean myself, to hide my dirty little secret

I spill a glass of wine on a patron  
I'm canned like canned beans  
I'm a crumb, crumbling, and wish to take flight with the birds  
that might swoop down and eat my remains

It remains to be seen whether I will ever be well  
But still, in the still of the night, I waken in a pool  
Swimming in my own sweat, treading water, keeping afloat  
Always wanting the dignity of a real job

Four jobs come and go  
Four score and seven, I'll be in heaven, if only I'm employable  
The foible I always seem to endure

Hope begets hope and I can indeed cope, fully aware that  
tomorrow is another day  
Eternally searching for the needle in the hay  
For it's a job, alone, being mentally ill  
And I work hard every day, unemployed, and stay that way  
A stay of execution of me, myself, and I

## What Bootstraps?

By Anonymous

Many of us who have a mental illness are unemployed or struggling to find work. Some of us are capable of working, and some are not. I have been in and out of employment for 25 years. I have always wanted to work and have always loved my jobs.

Human beings are often judgmental. Many people see us as outcasts or a burden on society. Some see the U.S. as a welfare state supporting those who are just too lazy to go to work. They may think we are gaming the system to get our disability checks. They think we should just pull ourselves up by our bootstraps and go out and get a job.

What these people don't understand is how crippling mental illness can be and difficult it is for some of us just to get up and get out the door every day. Some of us simply don't have bootstraps.

Some people with mental illnesses are highly sensitive to stress. The normal pressures and

criticism that take place on a daily basis in the workplace may be too much for them, and they simply cannot work a normal job.

Please understand this: Even if we're unemployed, those of us with a mental illness have a full-time job managing our illness and identifying ways to heal. This job goes on each and every day.



# Transitioning to Employment By Ian Hrachovec

While the prospect of looking for work may seem daunting to many, employment can actually help in the recovery process. How do you pursue work when you are on SSDI (Social Security Disability Insurance) or SSI (Supplemental Security Income)? Step Up on Second can help individuals who want to look for work.

If you are on SSI and you go to work, you will continue to receive your full SSI benefits. If you work while receiving SSDI,

your benefits may be reduced by a certain percentage. However, if you work and collect the reduced SSDI benefits, you can still take home more money than you would if you were unemployed and receiving the full benefits.

*For more information about working and SSI, SSDI, and Medi-Cal, attend the Work Readiness Group Thursdays at 1:00 PM at Step Up on Second.*

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work, but the opportunities are quite limited.

There are some bright spots. I have recently become involved in Step Up's Learning Center, a unique program that provides free computer training to members. This program, created and run by a Step Up member, Les Jones, covers a wide range of practical computer skills. I see people learning how to repair and program computers, use Microsoft applications, and build websites. This program provides the first steps towards a self-sustaining career that we can feel proud of achieving.

In my view, employers ought to overlook the lack of work history. A lack of work history is often the result of both the

illness and the social rejection that comes with it. I ask employers to please, base your judgment on our recent training and current references. Don't just assume we are unsuitable for employment. Be brave and patient. Give us a chance to work and heal.

People who live with a serious mental illness have a lot to contribute. Think of Isaac Newton, Ludwig van Beethoven, Vincent Van Gogh, Winston Churchill, and Virginia Woolf. There are countless others who have shaken the world with their contributions. We are diamonds in the rough, and we definitely have the capacity to shine brilliantly and become a true asset in the workforce.

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them—and all in a relaxed, nurturing environment.

And now, my dream has become a reality. With the support and encouragement of many wonderful people, I have created the Learning Center at Step Up on Second. Today, members of Step Up can come in and study a variety of courses—everything from Japanese to QuickBooks, to Windows 7. They can also study the Microsoft Office applications that might aid in gaining employment.

We have 12 computers and over 60 courses of study. But this is just the beginning. My vision is that we will build partnerships with businesses in the community—that the Learning Center will become a feeder for internships and provide skilled knowledge workers for local companies. I also

dream that these companies will contribute to our program to make it even better. Already, some employees from Google have donated their time to come to the Learning Center and teach our members computer skills.

What is most exciting to me is that soon members will be able to study to become fully licensed professional computer technicians. Can you imagine what that would do for someone—someone who for years had been held back and felt they couldn't ever get ahead?

Such is the magic of giving someone a chance—giving someone hope. I see it everyday and I am blessed to be a part of it.

## Faith continued from page 2

lot of faith to get up in the morning and go to a job where I have the constant struggle of trying to act normal.

The reason I speak of faith is that I have to constantly remind myself that I am a child of God and that even

though I have a mental illness, I have as much right as anyone to live and to work. It takes faith to believe that God is not finished with me yet. It takes a great deal of faith and courage, and I might add, prayer, to go out into this world with my head held high to face the constant battle and storms of this life.