

## Stories of Survival & Recovery



**Jeffrey Ryan** has been a powerful force for advocacy in the Florida mental health community for many years. While finding his way down the confusing path to his own recovery he has helped scores of fellow consumers fight for their dignity and rights. In 1992 he co-founded the Mindmenders Foundation, the first consumer/ survivor organization in Florida to contract with the state to provide peer run services. My story of illness and history of treatment begins in childhood at a time when mental health services were often harsh and damaging. At 13, I began to have auditory hallucinations telling me to kill myself. After trying to commit suicide in the early 1960s, I was committed to a State hospital, where I was kept for 9 months in an adult unit with about 40 residents- no children's unit existed. I was given a diagnosis of paranoid schizophrenia and put on several different kinds of medication including Thorazine, Stelazine, and Mellarile. In addition, I received electroconvulsive and hydrotherapy. The side effects of those medications and treatments were so horrible that I found the best "alternative" was "self-medicating" by abusing alcohol and drugs, starting at 14. After graduating high school I was drafted into the Air Force and spent 2 tours in Vietnam seeing and experiencing horrific events causing me to suffer from Posttraumatic Stress Disorder. During my path to recovery I identified a number of themes important in the process: Person centered services, peer support, meaningful activity and creative outlets, companionship, education, quality psychiatric services, and advocacy. It wasn't until the mid-80s that I found really positive treatment after I became involved with a support group run for anyone who was having mental health problems. While attending this group I found others suffering in similar situations. I learned a great deal from my fellow consumers about medications and therapy. I have been on several of the newer medications and since then my life has taken a turn for the better. Recovery is possible and there is no shame in having a brain disease - all it takes is an effort on your part.

Jeffrey Ryan