



Canadian Mental
Health Association
Ontario
Mental health for all

Association canadienne
pour la santé mentale
Ontario
La santé mentale pour tous

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Backgrounder

Born in New Brunswick, at age five, Linda Chamberlain came upon her father dead from a farm accident. Three years later, she was taken out of school to take care of her two younger sisters. She never learned to read or write as a child.

By 13, Linda was living alone in a rooming house in Toronto. At 18, she started hearing voices.

Linda called police so often they took her to old Clarke Institute of Psychiatry. She was diagnosed with schizophrenia. Six months later, a bus ticket and prescription in hand, she was released. After falling behind in rent, Linda lost her home.

Linda got married but happiness was short-lived. He abused her. Then, as he slept one night, she fled. She was homeless again, living with trauma and without work but remaining hopeful. She gained employment, made new friends and became a stripper. Vanessa the Undresser was her unlikely nom de plume.

Next, a trumped-up murder charge and Linda was back at the Clarke Institute of Psychiatry awaiting trial. She escaped and was hunted down in a cross-Canada chase. She was eventually acquitted but her life's struggles continued.

The streets of Toronto were her home on and off for 15 years. It was a struggle to survive, but Linda was determined. Her only friend: her cat, Giorgio. The two slept in a garbage bag in a park at night. But Chamberlain had hope.

In the early 1990s, her psychiatrist sent her to a support centre for people with mental illness and that's when her life began to turn around. She felt wanted again. She learned to read and write. She got a subsidized apartment, volunteered and began speaking out about the injustices facing people living with mental illness. Supportive housing was her anchor.

Linda was hired as a part-time peer-support worker and encouraged people as they achieved their goals. She helped them connect to community resources and advocate for themselves.

Linda co-founded the Dream Team – psychiatric survivors who speak to social work and medical classes as well as the public. She runs a social agency fostering pets of people with mental illness while they go into hospital.

And in spite of being diagnosed with bone and liver cancer last fall, Chamberlain continues to charge forward. Her tireless advocacy and volunteer work carries on. She remains a positive force for those in the mental health community.

To meet Linda Chamberlain, please come to her book launch.