

Judy Chamberlin (1944 - 2010)

PSYCHIATRIC SURVIVOR ACTIVIST

Recollections on her impact by Louise Pembroke, Jan Wallcraft and Andrew Roberts, who met Judi on her visits to the UK. All three are members of the Survivors History Group.

No mental patient since Clifford Beers has attracted such worldwide attention as Judi Chamberlin, who died on January 16, 2010.

Clifford had nurtured the mental health movement of the first half of the 20th century. His work culminated in 1948, with the founding of the World Federation for Mental Health. But he had already died in an asylum in 1943.

Judi Chamberlin was born the next year. Clifford was open about his experiences of mental distress but he was quiet about the network of fellow-patients who had supported him and kept him in touch with issues. The times had not been propitious for collective action.

Judi inherited the new world that the courage of Clifford and his secret friends had helped to create. Her life and work was to nurture not the worldwide mental health movement, but the worldwide movement of mental health users, victims and survivors.

Although she became an icon, Judi knew that she was just one of us. This article is not about the icon, but about the friend who shared her life with some of us in the UK.

What drove Judi into taking a leading role in the movement to guarantee basic human rights to psychiatric patients was her experience of involuntary confinement in a mental hospital in the 1960s and subsequent unhappy experiences with the normal system. As an American mental patient visiting Europe, Judi followed in the footsteps of her friend Anne Boldt. Anne introduced Judi to the English network of ex-Mental Patients Union members and, like Anne, she used the successor to the MPU house as her base for touring Europe during the first half of the 1980s. Anne reported in *Lawletter* (UK) and *Madness Network News* (USA) on groups such as PROMPT and the Matthew O'Hara Committee in the UK, as well as on groups in Denmark, the Netherlands, and elsewhere.

Judi first arrived in the UK in July 1982, and promptly fell ill. Her new MPU friends actually thought she might die, but a doctor revived her by prescribing a small sip of aspirin!

My trip to London seems almost dreamlike. I was there such a short time, and the day of sickness was such a drag. But I really was there, I really did ride on the double-decker buses, and see the Tower of London.

In August a postcard arrived from Iceland, where she had arrived after further illness in Holland. Judi's enormous energy and achievement came from her soul, not her body.

Judi has left us her book, *On Our Own: Patient-Controlled Alternatives to the Mental Health System* (1978). She told us that she had wanted to write the story of the movement, but the publishers would only allow her to write about alternatives. Nevertheless, she had squeezed in as much as she could about the movement.

As people might know, in 1985 Mind decided to invite



people from Holland, Denmark and the USA to represent the mental patients' movement at the World Congress in Brighton. They thought that the English, were "not together enough".

Judi accepted her invitation to be a guest speaker because it paid her fare to Europe and gave her the opportunity to renew her links with the English movement. Meeting with old MPU friends in London, she discussed the irony that she would be speaking to an audience from which the English users were excluded.

We did not know then that Frank Bangay, Eric Irwin and Barry Blazeby from CAPO were planning to gatecrash the conference. They put up a resistance stall outside the Congress, and survivors from other countries negotiated them into the main hall. A revolution had started. European survivors (including Scottish and English) and the American (Judi) took over the part of the Congress that they thought they should own.

"I got quite involved in Brighton, working out a declaration on 'self and citizen advocacy' ... Most of it is liberal but I think our section (Part 2) is pretty radical", Judi wrote back to London.

That autumn, Mind's annual conference was devoted to the English users' movement. No longer "not together enough", they ran the conference. Frank Bangay even provided the off-site entertainment.

Survivors Speak Out started in January 1986, with Peter Campbell as its secretary and, in December 1987, Jan Wallcraft was employed by Mind to start what became MindLink. Here, Jan first heard about Judi, because Anny Brackx, the dynamic founder and editor of OpenMind, was gearing-up to publish *On Our Own* as a Mind publication. "I read it and identified with so much," she said, "and I think her ideas continued to influence my thinking and writing

about service-user-led crisis services, my PhD, and all my work thenceforth.”

Louise Pembroke, Education Officer of Survivors Speak Out, met Judi at the start of her own activism. Louise recalls “a landmark conference” in Brighton, entitled Common Concerns, in September 1988.

Mind supported this three-day event with international survivor speakers from the USA and Canada, such as Judi, ‘Howie the Harp’ and David Reville. Practically everyone who was active in the 80s either attended or knew what happened by word of mouth. Judi was inspirational to me as there were few women leaders in the British survivor movement at that time, and here was a world leader talking about user-run services, which for some of us was a dream we thought not possible.

Valerie Argent, of the MPU, last met Judi in June 1990 when they lunched with Rae Unzicker (Co-ordinator of the National Association of Psychiatric Survivors) in London. The next time Judi, Rae and (this time) her husband came to London, in April 1992, Rae was saying that she wanted an obituary like Valerie’s. Rae died some years ago. We hope she got her wish.

Jan Wallcraft first met Judi when she and Rae came to Mind.

One of my best ever memories was when Pam Jenkinson, then of National Schizophrenia Fellowship, invited Judi, Rae and me to a restaurant in Park Lane for a truly posh afternoon tea. Judi asked the waiter if she could have decaffeinated cappuccino. He said she could, listing many further options she could have, and she said, in that emphatic American accent: ‘You. Are. WONDERFUL! I think I will take you home with me.’ The waiter looked so charmed and pleased.

Judi and Rae then made sure that Jan was the next person Mind sent to the USA.

Mind’s then Director, Ros Hepplewhite, had attended the conference of the National Association for Rights Protection and Advocacy (NARPA) the previous year. Judi and Rae suggested to Ros that it would not look right for her to go two years running and that she should send Jan, as MindLink co-ordinator the next time.

So I had this life-changing trip, my first long distance flight, staying a week with Judi in Boston and then travelling with her to the NARPA event in Austin, Texas, where I met icons of mine such as Leonard Roy Frank, the anti-ECT campaigner, and all the other leading names of the US survivor movement such as Sylvia Caras, Darby Penney, Celia Brown and many more. It left me with a conviction that the international survivor movement had enormous power and right behind it, and that we should believe in ourselves more, as the US survivors clearly did. That conviction has never left me.

Louise says that whenever Judi visited, she would take her and Peter Campbell out for a meal, “and we treasured our

time with her and valued what we learnt and shared with her.” Judi would have treasured the obituary that Louise Pembroke wrote for her. It is called *Memories of Judi Chamberlin: Dignified activism*.

What was so striking to me about Judi was her total lack of ego and ‘stardom’. Frankly, even if she had been, I certainly would have forgiven it because she had the intellect, hard work and unconditional compassion to back everything she did, and at a time when there were not the financial rewards there can be now. Judi wasn’t interested in kudos and personal status, all she was interested in was furthering the greater good of survivors, for us all to be met with love, compassion and with patient-controlled alternatives to psychiatry.

Face to face, one to one, she was no different, she was interested to share experiences with us, would give us her full attention and was kind and generous. She always made you feel like whatever you had to say mattered. Judi was always dignified. I never saw her raise her voice or rant at anyone, yet she could calmly and effectively argue the most seasoned opponents under the table. She was also a fine academic but a good one in that she could make a well-read argument accessible to anyone.

The year after, I spoke alongside Judi in Montreal, at a conference for Canadian survivors. We also shared a hotel room and unsurprisingly Judi was a gracious room-mate. To sit beside someone who was a living legend to me was very special indeed. Even when I know she disagreed with her peers she would do so quietly and with respect, never putting down another’s thinking. She made people think not only by the sheer strength of her words, but also how she imparted them, measured, powerful. She was deadly serious in her work, driven and dedicated. Judi was a role model to me because she embodied how I felt activism should be, how we could best conduct ourselves as activists.

She was also aware of how difficult it could be too, and how survivors were also capable of cannibalising each other, and to my mind she led by example, by keeping her focus on the work in hand. To understand what Judi gave us all over thirty years of her life, listen to her speak at the 2007 World Psychiatric Association conference on ‘Coercive Treatment in Psychiatry’. Even if you never knew her or her work, listen to this 30 minute talk. It is a bright shining beacon to survivors across the world. Her last sentence will live in my heart forever: ‘Nothing about us without us!’

Judi Chamberlin: *On Our Own: Patient-Controlled Alternatives to the Mental Health System* (Hawthorne, 1978) is reprinted and available from the National Empowerment Center.

To hear Judi go to: <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=3396224219182374265>