

# A personal journey teaches power of art

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In many ways, the arduous road Frank Marquit traveled as a young man led him through a personal journey of pain, sacrifice and enlightenment. What began as a reckless introduction to adulthood, eventually blossomed into a personal and professional commitment that changed his life and influenced countless others. And it all began with the bottle.

It took a severe addiction to drugs and alcohol and a long, almost deadly battle with depression before the then 27-year-old Prattsville native realized he wanted to live. And he wanted to help others in similar situations.

And he has.

Today, the large, soft-spoken 48-year-old Marquit operates National Artists for Mental Health, an organization in Catskill he co-founded 10 years ago with local artist and friend Ralph Ivery. The goal of the program was to display art created by individuals diagnosed with mental illness. Also an activist for reform in the mental health field, Marquit hoped their art would help dissolve the stigma surrounding mental illness. It was a new approach for working with a population often misunderstood by mainstream society, yet the potential for healing and community building seemed endless.

"We wanted to bring the com-

munity together through the arts," Marquit said recently from his small office strewn with files and artwork in downtown Catskill.

Dozens of exhibits and art workshops later, NAMH has developed into a unique holistic health and advocacy center serving more than 2,000 recipients of mental health services statewide.

## Stressful undertaking

Much like Marquit's dubious past, establishing a viable mental health center was as risky and uncertain as his cyclical relationship had been with drugs, alcohol and depression. Once Marquit overcame his fight with addiction, he obtained a degree in counseling and dove into a career in the mental health field. He began volunteering at a community residence in Kingston in 1987 and eventually took in a young homeless man diagnosed with schizophrenia. It was an experience Marquit calls "a huge and stressful undertaking." Realizing there was no assistance for people caring for the mentally ill in Greene County, he decided to form The Family Network, a support group for relatives and caretakers.

After the group's initial fundraiser, Marquit donated a portion of the money to the Catskill Public Library to purchase books on mental health, drug abuse and AIDS. His interest in lobbying for



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**FRANK MARQUIT**, left, of Catskill, and **Ralph Ivery** of Albany are founders of the National Artists for Mental Health.

change in the mental health system led to a shift in focus from families to recipients of mental health services. In 1990, Marquit founded NAMH's precursor, the Alliance for the Mentally Ill of Greene County, a drop-in and advocacy center.

On a budding idea to sell cards painted by recipients, Marquit enlisted Ivery's help to lead a few art classes. The greeting cards project never took off, but what did develop was a sizable number of paintings and artwork created by center patrons. The group held its first art show at Columbia-Greene Community College. With 45 people in attendance, the show was a success. (By 1997 the annual art show grew so large, with more than 400 pieces of art from 45 counties, NAMH began encouraging each county to

host its own show. NAMH now displays art on its Web site.)

Realizing the center needed a larger office with classrooms and gallery space, Marquit took the first of several financial risks in his career. With only \$7,500 in the center's coffers, he signed a two-year lease for storefront space on Main Street with \$7,000 in annual rent.

"It was high risk, but I'm a visionary and I could look into the future and see that it could really happen," he said. Other times, he used his own Social Security disability check to pay staff salaries when money was tight — which was most of the time.

### Unstructured format

Led by 49-year-old Ivery, recipients started dropping by regularly

to draw, paint, sculpt clay or make masks. The format was open and unstructured, allowing people to participate or discuss their artwork as they wished. Several paintings and sketches eventually sold for as much as \$100. The classes were both creative and therapeutic.

"There's such a sense of peace and acceptance in (Ivery's) art classes," said Beverly Burgdorf, a former NAMH recipient who later opened the Water Street Peer Advocacy and Art Studio in Catskill. "The classes were a non-threatening place to explore and make art."

Though the organization was providing successful classes, it needed a large cash infusion in order to survive. They applied for a \$75,000 grant from the Henry Van Ameringen Foundation in New York City for an agency van and a year's worth of staff salary. Two months later the foundation requested a tour of the facilities and a chance to meet the officers and recipients. Impressed by the group's dedication and work, the foundation awarded them \$100,000 instead. Marquit took another risk by eliminating his disability payments with the determination of securing sufficient operating funds each year. Between federal, state and regional financial support, the agency has thrived and established itself as an alternative mental health organization that encourages personal exploration through artistic expression. Still a growing organization, it now operates under a \$300,000 annual budget.

The group, which also provides

job skills training, formally changed its name to National Artists for Mental Health in 1998 in recognition of its emphasis on art.

"We're still service oriented and we provide advocacy, but we're primarily an arts organization," Marquit said. "That's how we were known in the beginning."

Marquit is still actively working to break down stereotypes by educating the public and giving individuals with mental illness a place to gather. More than half of the agency's board members have a psychiatric diagnosis as well as four of NAMH's seven-member staff. Four years ago, NAMH began hosting art healing conferences with the help of area therapists and artists, and continues sponsoring day-long art workshops throughout the state.

Marquit also plans to continue the national Pillows of Unrest project, an educational, anti-stigma campaign he created in which artists use pillowcases as canvases to express themselves through art, poetry or stories. So far, 1,500 pillowcases have been displayed and were recently shown at the Legislative Office Building in Albany.

As the lead art teacher for the organization, Ivery has personally witnessed the powerful therapeutic quality of producing art. The goal, Ivery said, is to help people heal through art.

"Art is very natural," he said. "It's a spiritual tool that helps you connect with your inner self. There is a balance to everything, and when you find that balance you're able to deal with society."