

SUNDAY CONVERSATION

Mental health advocate discusses past, future

Betsy Schwartz gets sentimental when she talks about her three decades as CEO of Mental Health America of Greater Houston.

Schwartz took the helm of the nonprofit in August 1980. Now she is about to become vice president for public education and special initiatives at the National Council for Community Behavioral Health Care in Washington, D.C. She will oversee a program called Mental Health First Aid, designed to teach people how to recognize and treat mental illness.

Schwartz recently talked with Houston Chronicle reporter Renee C. Lee about her MHA career.

Q: What do you credit for your long tenure at MHA?

A: I absolutely love the organization. I think the mission and the people are so unique. I actually have a low tolerance for boredom, which doesn't seem possible with the same job for 30 years. But the breadth and depth of MHA means that we can work in so many significant areas.

Q: What is the organization's mission?

A: Our mission is to promote mental health and to improve care and treatment of people with mental illnesses. That's a very large scope, and within that comes a responsibility to do everything we can to normalize any kind of mental health problem. I have seen tremendous change in that area over the last 30 years. Still,

people are reluctant to admit major mental health problems. But I think we have come a long way in people understanding that mental illnesses are physiological brain disorders ... and that people deserve treatment.

Q: What other changes have there been?

A: The organization has grown tremendously. When I started, the budget was \$100,000 and we had three staff. At our peak, we had 25 staff and a \$2.5 million budget. We've since had a few changes when the economy turned.

One of the issues when I very first started was the need for a crisis system. There was no place for people to go ... and the treatment was really inhumane.

At that time, people who were involuntary committed were housed, not hospitalized, in old Jeff Davis Hospital. In the early '80s, we took community leaders on tours of the civil commitment unit. Our advocacy, I think, was a leading force in closing that.

What is now the neuropsychiatric center, which is the MHMR (Mental Health Mental Retardation) crisis system, ... has been in place for the last 20 years. It has grown, not in volume, but in the diversity of programs that it offers. So it's a double-edge sword. The good news is that we now have one of the best crisis systems in the country, but the tragedy is that's the main point of access and that people are forced into crisis over and

over again because there's no system to keep them stable.

Q: What have been some of the organization's major initiatives?

A: In the early 1990s, MHA convened a group of stakeholders to look at the fact that so many people with mental illness were in jail and to figure out ... what could law enforcement do to prevent that from happening. That group looked at best practices around the country and that was the beginning of what is now the crisis intervention team. I think, by far, that is one thing that I'm most proud of. The diversity of excellent programs in the Houston Police Department, which really are a national model, is something we can all be proud of. We replicated the same process for the juvenile justice system. Now what happens to kids when they enter juvenile justice system is completely different than what happened to them 10 years ago. ... Now every child who stays in the juvenile justice system has a very comprehensive clinical assessment.

Q: What about the organization's involvement with postpartum awareness?

A: Right after the first Andrea Yates verdict, her attorney, George Parnham, called me and said he wanted there to be an ongoing effort to prevent such a tragedy from happening again. He asked



JAMES NIELSEN : CHRONICLE

NEW JOB: Betsy Schwartz is resigning after 31 years to head to Washington.

me if MHA would consider creating a fund and work that would be ongoing, and our board approved it. We now have the Yates Children's Memorial Fund. ... We now refer to it as our Women's Health Initiative, which has several different components, including screening moms for postpartum depression and training physicians and nurses.

Q: What changes do you see in the future?

A: What I think has huge potential and is gaining momentum is what we refer to as "integrated care." That means that mental health and substance abuse will be normalized into overall health care. When somebody has a heart attack, they're automatically 40 percent at a greater risk for having major depression. Yet how many cardiologists routinely tell someone when they had a heart attack they need to know that they may be feeling depressed when they never experienced that before? Hopefully, 10 years from now we won't fragment parts of brain connected to emotions and mental illness from parts of body that cause other illnesses.

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