

Altered States of the Arts: History

Compiled by Gayle Bluebird

This is a historical narrative of Altered States of the Arts, an organization that currently exists in name only but was active for over 30 years. The narrative includes the memories of some of the artists including performers and writers written in short vignettes, interesting to read, many with humor and words that express anti-psychiatry politics.

While the organization never became a formal organization, it is no less significant that there are many accomplishments to remember. How better to document a history than to record memories from the artists themselves, those who are still with us, and those who have passed but have left legacies for us to celebrate. Many of the artists served in different roles as political activists for which they have been more recognized than as artists. A few have become financially sufficient selling their art and creating arts businesses.

Within these memories you will see how some of the goals of the Altered States of the Arts were met. Some of them are documented here as artists talk about their recollections. Some of the artists portray serious messages. But we also chose to create fun memories as there was much fanfare with colors on banners, costumes that spoke a message. Skits, dance, songs visual art, poetry. So many people portrayed their talents humorously; laughter was an accomplishment. Making fun of... Portraying made up characters... dance with flair and meaning.

After reading this history, you, as an artist and activist, may be the one (s) to roll up your sleeves and say, let's organize, organize for the sake of change in the mental health system as well as personal and social change. Reclaim it, create new arts programs, presentations, fun adventures. Art for change and Power

We begin: The Annual Alternatives Conferences gave a place for the arts to flourish. Altered States a background that caused an arts organization to form. Annual talent shows showcased performers that told stories, which used art for social change.

At one of the first conferences in Ohio and West Virginia, talent shows were held that were informal, an opportunity for anyone to get up and sing a song, read a poem, not necessarily theirs. The shows accommodated the "folks" who had no political agenda though others in the conference were engaged in politics of our movement.

It was at one of these conferences that someone got up and did a skit portraying herself as drunk. It was a very real, true to this person's life, which served as a ringing bell in this writer's mind. Talent shows, she thought, should contain a message, should tell a person's story of lived experience or psychiatric story as a person with lived experience with a mental illness or

psychiatric experience. The criteria were in the making for all performers to present original art. Perhaps Utah may conjure up other memories about that conference but for me, this was a beginning. No one had begun to be the leader or coordinator for the arts as it was still fluff in the minds of the real history makers. I inadvertently assumed the position. in college auditoriums of universities where the conference was held.

It soon was common knowledge that all performances would reflect the meanings of the conferences. People came prepared.

The talent shows at successive conferences began to perform to large audiences. When Howie the Harp became the emcee for the shows, we had someone whose very presence was an act. Howie in large form, with funny anecdotes, a welcoming attitude towards each performer.

Some of the performers were annual presenters. Names like Names began to be recognized as they returned ready to go, each year. Art Liebowitz from PA, Cookie Gant, MI, Beth Greenspan, Michael Mundis to name a few.

To me, the writer of this history, this is the most significant part of the website and the most fun to create as catching up with artists who are still alive and capturing their portions of history is compelling.

Revelatory, revolutionary, radical, progressive, may be some of the words used to define the organization. Always without funds, except for a few allocations of funds for special projects mostly from the Center from Mental Health Services. work voluntarily.

Our history: As presented on our brochures

Altered States of the Arts is a nationwide network of creative people with disabilities such as recipients of psychiatric services, issues with substance abuse, homelessness, HIV and/or are physically challenged, breaking away from traditional terms, we may identify ourselves as mad artists, change agents, or other preferred terms. Howie the Harp, one of the Altered States founders, once called us "Crazy Folks Artists."

We were founded in 1991 at the Pittsburgh "Alternatives," with four ex-patients, now called consumers or survivors, met with each other with the intent to form an organization of the arts. Sally clay was a talented writer, and poet came up with the name, Altered States of the Arts. Howie had nodded off as he had a sleep disorder but when he came back, he loved the name, and exclaimed, a" Delusion Come True."

OUR PHILOSOPHY *written by Sally Clay

Always art speaks truth. The visions and voices of artists may be of revelation or may be revolutionary but certainly not art therapy.

We recognize that through the ages, creative artists have been called “crazy”. Today, many gifted persons are labeled “mentally ill” and thereby denied freedom of expression. We believe that the ‘madness’ of our altered states is a part of human nature to be validated rather than suppressed.

We embrace the idea that madness dwells within the creative process, just as creativity is sequestered within madness. We believe that true art is by nature uplifting and enlightening, it is neither treatment nor therapy, but it is nevertheless healing and therapeutic.

We proudly proclaim that, through art and education, we can change the psychiatric mindset and transform the world.

Howie the Harp: (1953-1995) Howie was a leader in the consumer/survivor/ex-patient movement who made peace with music, playing his harmonica everywhere he went. He taught us to be Crazy and Proud—on stage our music and drama would help people understand us. We could make changes in the mental health system. Howie resides in the Intergalactic Movement where his presence continues to guide us.

David Oaks Zap Woman:

David Oaks wrote a skit and presented, different versions of Zap Woman, featuring a woman, Kris Yates who wore a flaming red scarf. The point of what you might call “comic protest” was the tug of war between traditional psychiatry and a woman fighting against receiving shock treatment. The psychiatrist played by David Oaks, and others dressed in clinical garb and Zap Woman who didn’t know which way to go. Jane Oaks was the moderator.

“Addressing a difficult social change topic often needs humor, play, and art. We Mind Freedom activists went to many conferences and protests featuring speaker after speaker. A skit with the brilliant Kristina Yates playing Zap Woman, psychiatric survivor, Janet Foner narrating and myself playing a psychiatrist sounded like fun.

We performed about six times, and always Zap Woman would be the oppressed and lead us to victory. Typically, we began in a ward and we inmates united to fight back. It was very simple but popular.”

Zap Woman skits evolved for me at a Screening for Normality, inspired by my friend, Patch Adams and his clown troupes. I would love to co-create other skits using humor to resist normality which many scientists confirm a threatening life on Earth.

Kris Yates as Zap Woman:

“Playing the role of Zapwoman was one of my favorite parts of being an activist fighting for human rights in psychiatry. With a background in street theater, Zap Woman fit me well. I loved rushing on stage with my red caped and its lightening bolt image flying off my shoulder like super woman. I was the hero saving the day from someone about to be zapped with ECT. IN

reality I received ECT in Ubdue in the 1970s was the most tragic experience in my life (and I've survived a lot of traumas).

Another unique performance was The Haldol Sisters: The Haldol Sisters

In 1990, word spread that Alternatives in April 1991 was going to be at the University of CA at Berkeley, home of the Free Speech Movement. Santa Cruz County budgeted \$5,500 to send 23 people. We slept in a student hostel. When Jane Kysor read about a talent show at Alternatives '91, she bought five oversized tee shirts, and, with a blue marker, wrote on each The Haldol Sisters. So, six women, all members of the Psychiatric Inmates Rights Committee who were poets, artists, and activists, went on stage for the first time.

We opened our act with a limerick:

There once was a client named Mindy,
Who wanted to chair a committee,
"Oh No," said her doc,
"You'll get stressed and need shock."
Now Mindy smokes all day on the settee.

Then we began our line dance to the Hokey Pokey tune.

You speak to the nurse,
You hide from the nurse,
You cry to the nurse,
And shake your drool about.
You do the Haldol Shuffle,
Try to turn yourself around.
That's what it's all about!

People who won't listen to a lecture that we need Housing Not Haldol will tap their foot to a tune that is entertaining and remember the words.

Dale Nitzberg from MD created a skit called, The PMS Poster Child.

Early performers included Jeff Foss (NH) on the piano, Michael Mundis (PA) who sang songs he wrote, Nancy Bowker, and Rod Schraiber with his son, always performing some comic presentation.

Peer-run video companies agreed to tape the shows. White Light, Mary Moran, MC Video, Prosumers (Texas)

Tribute to Howie: by Jeanne Matulis:

Jeanne Matulis wrote a song about Howie, soon after he died in 1995. See it here:

How We Love Howie
(all rights reserved)

How we love Howie! He gave us a song.
How we love Howie! He led us along.
How we love Howie! He dreamed us a dream.
And his dreamin' grows greater and strong.

Verses:

His name was Howie the Harp.
And he earned his name on the street.
In exchange for a laugh and a hearty song,
He found a place to sleep and to eat.
He found a place to sleep and to eat.

(Repeat Chorus)

As a child they put him in chains,
But they never captured his spirit.
With a song in his heart, he set his soul free.
He'd rather fight the system than fear it.
He'd rather fight the system than fear it.

(Repeat Chorus)

But he didn't think of himself,
He always remembered the others
Who were out on the streets or in a lockdown.
We are all his sisters and brothers.
We are all his sisters and brothers.

(Repeat Chorus)

Jeanne Matulis—Locked up for two-and-a half years as a teenager, she later found people like herself- ex-inmates in California—and became an advocate at Mental Health Consumer Concerns Inc., a client run patients' rights organization. As a songwriter and musician, she sang protest songs at many events. She later went to law school and after getting her law degree, worked for Protection and Advocacy, Inc., a federally funded agency, for seven- and- a -half years. Her work has now evolved into the field of forensic mental health. She wrote this song in memory of Howie.

We developed a brochure for the organization with the goal of developing a newsletter containing news of artists, including performers and poets and the goals and developments of arts initiatives.

The Brochure:

Our goals changed and new brochures were created to illustrate them.

One of our first goals was to create a newsletter/journal of the arts in a particular locale. Two booklets were created from Broward County, Florida which were called, The Altered State. Then we put out a request for other communities or states to produce a journal which resulted in journals done in California, (1993), New York State, (1994), National Mental Health Consumers Self-Help Clearinghouse in 1995 and later three journals done by Jon Brock in Alabama, each of them glossy covered "magazines." 1996- 1997-1998.

We also worked to have more of a presence at alternatives Conferences. To that end we started a pre-conference arts day that occurred at the time people were registering for the conference. The pre-conference arts day worked very well as tables were set up in a room adjoining the hallway where registration was taking place. People could do a variety of arts activities at tables that included writing, drawing, painting, and collage. Each table was hosted by a particular artist who had skills in that area and volunteered to do one of the activities.

Jean Campbell Recollects

After we held several pre-conference arts days successfully, which only involved the time that reception was taking place, we chose to organize an all-day arts conference in 2009 in St. Louis. Rooms were made available to us on the mezzanine where different activities were presented, including Sacred Circle dance, (Deb Trueheart), Sing along (Mike Skinner), Pillowcases Art (Sharon Wise), Improv Theater (Jean Campbell, and poetry/writing by myself. Each of the activities allowed for two hours after which the group came together and had a discussion about the outcomes. We remember that we had a good crowd, some of the arts forms had better attendance than others. The day was a success!

During the conference there was an increase in arts workshops that covered a variety of subjects.

We needed someone to create a website for Altered States, and Ed Pazicky, a lover of the arts, came forward and did a great job showcasing artists from different arts organizations NS IN different states and communities quarterly. Unfortunately, when Ed died, we were unable to access the material from his computer. The Name Altered States of the Arts was taken by another organization, and we could not access previous website entries.

Story Of Reaching Across with the Arts

In addition to the website, we were given the opportunity to create a manual on the arts, Reaching Across with the Arts following the publication with the same name created by Sally Zinman, Howie the Harp and Sue Bud that focused on advocacy, activism and defining peer support. ([Reaching Across with the Arts](#) is part of this website)

In 1992 Mark Davis had created a character for himself with the title Miss Altered States and presented her at a Philadelphia Alternatives Conference in 1992. At the talent show he stepped up dramatically to the stage with an escort by his side wearing a fur coat while the record Crazy was playing. No one predicted what would happen next. Mark took off his fur coat to show himself in a ballroom gown. Eventually he dressed down to a bathing suit, primming himself to show off his legs, his full-breasted body, and the glamor of his face with a great deal of make-up. The audience nearly fell off their chairs. The audience roared and laughed and practically fell out of their chairs, (my emphasis)! The outrageously comedic display of himself was fun, but he later took the mic to reveal what he called, "Drag With a Tag" when he talked about a variety of mental health issues, as well as topics on suicide, gay lesbian, transgender, AIDs, homelessness and others. He was not shy about saying he was HIV positive, or that his lover and sister had committed suicide. He felt well equipped to talk about subjects that would enlighten his audience. After his first experience as Miss Altered States, he continued to display her and not just at Alternatives but at gay parades and other gay events. Dubbed himself, Miss Altered States, complete with a banner that he portrayed her at future conferences as well as gay parades and other mental health conferences.

I, in turn, created a character named Henrietta who donned herself in outlandish costumes with reasonably big boobs, noticeable at least, with high heels that had straps wrapped around her ankles, surely from the 20s. She wore a pair of stockings that had an orange striped pattern to it that was almost convincing I had painted my legs. Loosely based on Lily Tomlin's character, the telephone operator, Henrietta played a dizzy confused caller to subjects who could not help but be confounded. She might be calling to find out where the party was at that was meant to be the very show she was at. At one of the conferences, she sat at the table calling Howie the Harp who always said he was going to the intergalactic movement.

Amy Smith:

"I was always very shy at the Alternatives conferences, often fleeing to my room in between workshops to rest for a moment, eating alone, going to bed early.... I was not in the 'inner circles', not a fun nighttime person: on the inside, I was pretty much always writhing in social anxiety. Participating in the Arts events planning gave me a purpose, a reason for being there. I had a place to be, tasks set before me, that made the entire conference more accessible. Often my son, Ty, was at my side, early in the pre-conference mornings, setting up tables, coordinating with the artists, arranging for pillowcase deliveries; I remember one year the hotel took on the pillowcase responsibility and somehow delivered a days' worth and a roomful of bed linen to the arts area, shoulder high sheets, blankets AND pillowcases!

Olympian Corinna West kept us entertained by flinging her body through the air in various Olympic vaults & somersaults into the sheets & pillowcases until we straightened that snafu out! At the 2012 Portland Alternatives, I won the coveted Howie the Harp Arts Award, truly the most significant award ever handed to me in my life. It was my last year attending

The Altered State is the only nationally distributed creative journal by and for people who have been through some psychiatric experience. The Altered State is one of the forms of the consumer/survivor/ex-patient movement—a social reform movement whose two purposes are to reform the mental health services and to dissolve the stigma that accompanies a psychiatric experience.

Brock: (To be written by Jon who we finally were able to contact thus the following will be changed) came to us wanting to do an Alabama edition and wound up doing three issues, each one more sophisticated than the other.

The Southern Edition's intent is to give greater access for the talent that is among southern participants in the consumer/survivor/ex-patient movement.

If there is a common theme to the material in this issue, it is to remind us that the first purpose of communication is to say how things are, to witness. The enclosed material witnesses how things are. That's a starting place for us to get to know how things should be.

Production of this issue was made possible by a number of individuals and organizations. By contributing much of the necessary paper an anonymous donor enabled us to print 8,500 copies of the Southern Edition. Jon got assistance from the organization the Visionary Guild for the mentally ill, Communication Arts, technical assistance for the color cover.

Sybil Noble:

Sybil was one of the earliest artists who took part in the early radical anti-psychiatry demonstrations. Her art was shown on Altered States early brochures (see Photo) Sybil often told the story about how an art therapist once took away her colored pencils because her art was too dark. Sybil later continued to create art with complex images, often with faces that appeared distorted. She has had her art shown at galleries but lately is retired, without any outlets for her work.

Sybil went to art school at the Avila liberal Arts University which she stated was very hard to get into. She was the first, possibly, the only person to get an Eli Lilly Schizophrenia Reintegration Scholarship with help from Voc. Rehab. She graduated in 2006 with a BA in art therapy (but couldn't practice because she didn't have a master's degree. She stated that between Vocational Rehab and Eli Lilly, they spent over \$70,000. She and her husband Jerry ran a drop-in center in St. Louis MO for many years with a great emphasis on the arts.

In our early Altered States brochures her art was on the front covers. covers. She was the only person we know of who got a Pell Grant to go to art school as a person with a disability. Art exhibits were not usually a part of Alternatives Conferences but in St. Louis, she and Virginia Kitterman created a fine exhibit mostly with art from Kansas City, Kansas and Kansas City MO. Sybil received a Howie the Harp award in 2007 at the Alternatives Conference. Though Sybil has not had a way for her art to be shown permanently she has a collection of postcards with her art that we think should be shown and sold.

Show some of her work here.

David Kime: Transcendent Visions

David Kime did a zine (pronounced “Zeen”) he explains is a small handmade amateur publication done purely out of passion, rarely making a profit or even breaking even. He describes his first issue as vile and quite frankly, I was terribly embarrassed by its contents. So much so, that he sent letters to everyone to apologize. But when he was in the hospital for depression he received letters telling him to continue.

In 1998 he did a zine issue, more like a small magazine for Pennsylvania for which he got support from the National Mental Health Consumer Self-Help Clearinghouse located in Philadelphia, PA. David’s issue captures the everyday people, people with a gripe, people whose work isn’t scrutinized but sometimes close to controversial. As an artist, David created odd looking creatures, like pre-hysteric Barbie dolls, or poems that included our bodily wastes. A poem called Goose Poop University is an example. He also created masks full of feather and beads. One thing true of all of the issues of The Altered States makes a point of saying who people are in his unique words. David’s death was a great loss to art as absurd and quirky.

Mike Skinner
Carla Cubit
James Eret

Jon Brock

In the mid-1990s, while attending a national meeting of consumer/survivor activists, I first saw a copy of The Altered State magazine.

The Altered State was a small advocacy magazine full of writing and art by consumers and survivors of public mental health services.

I liked it. And I liked it even more, as I realized that each issue was published by a different group of consumer/survivor advocates.

That approach to magazine production promoted skills in editing and publishing among consumer/survivor activists from all over the country — and promoted use of consumer/survivor material from all over the country.

All that seemed terrific. I became interested in publishing an issue of The Altered State — and wanted to use material from consumer/survivors in Southern states.

After all, I was from Alabama and had been committed to our state's old, huge, implacable mental hospital. I knew the South was full of consumers and survivors who had found no way to tell their stories or show others their art.

Additionally, I was motivated by my several earlier failures to find a leadership role in Alabama's consumer/survivor movement.

I told myself that I might be more successful at editing and publishing a Southern Edition of The Altered State.

So, I contacted Gayle Bluebird, and asked her support. Gayle gave me the go-ahead.

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I began to contact consumers and survivors in Southern states --- individuals and organizations -- asking them to submit writings and art for the magazine.

At the same time, I approached the owner of a large local paper supply company. I described my purpose — and asked him to donate enough paper to let me print thousands of magazine copies. The owner walked me through his large warehouse and came across an astoundingly large roll of very high grade paper that had sat in his warehouse for many, many months.

He offered to give me that high grade paper -- on condition that I never publicly thank him. He wanted to avoid having more people ask him for donated paper.

Meanwhile, I was working as Quality Control Supervisor at a local United Way Workshop. Their helpful printer put me in contact with a local printing company that agreed to print the magazine at a relatively low price.

A friend put me in contact with a local computer programmer who had access to a high capacity computer and was skilled in formatting material for printing.

As I acquired more written material and art, that programmer helped me format the most satisfying material in the most satisfying sequence.

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A surprisingly large number of individuals and groups helped me produce, print, and distribute the first and second issues of The Southern Edition of The Altered State.

The quality and quantity of material increased. The 3rd issue could only get better.

For the 3rd and final issue, I became determined to include stories of individuals committed to Bryce Hospital. Again, I was committed there, when I was twenty-two.

As I thought back to those difficult months, I remembered Mrs. Frank Jones. A young nurse pointed her out, after walking me the long distance from my locked ward to the Therapeutic Recreation Room.

Mrs. Frank Jones was an elderly, grey-haired, lady who seemed capable. She was leading a meeting of the Women's Club — a group of about twenty women, who were gathered to discuss current events.

The young nurse explained: "That's Mrs. Frank Jones. She's been a patient here at Bryce for 30 years. She had been an elementary school teacher. Then, one day in her class, she stabbed a young girl to death."

Years later, I learned that terrible, terrible tale was in no way true.

As I prepared the final issue of the Southern Edition of The Altered State, the Director of Bryce Hospital agreed to let me read Mrs. Frank Jones' medical record — if her close relatives gave me permission.

Mrs. Frank Jones' brother, who had committed her, was dead. But I located his son, her nephew, spoke with him, and he gave me written permission to read her file.

As I read her file, I began to understand the facts. Mrs. Frank Jones' husband had died and she was raising her 16 year old daughter without adequate income.

Her nephew explained that Mrs. Frank Jones would arrive at her brother's law office, frantic about finances, and cause embarrassment to her brother.

The brother committed Mrs. Jones to Bryce. After a year, the then-Bryce Hospital Director wrote repeated letters to the brother, saying that Mrs. Jones had completely recovered and that her family should come to Bryce and take her out of the hospital.

In the medical file, all of the brother's original letters were there. In each letter, the brother was non-responsive to the Bryce Director's request to take his now-recovered sister out of Bryce.

Over years and decades, Mrs. Frank Jones developed a social role for herself and many other women at Bryce — while front-line Bryce staff developed a terrible tale to explain to themselves, why she was kept at Bryce.

In 1971, when the Wyatt-Stickney Lawsuit compelled Alabama to move more patients out of that centralized facility into community-based mental health programs, Mrs. Frank Jones finally left Bryce, after being committed there for 37 years.