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Contribute to Connexions

Don Weitz in conversation with Ulli Diemer

This conversation between Don Weitz and Ulli Diemer was recorded in Toronto on December 8, 2016, and transcribed by Robert Pennant. It has been lightly edited. [Seven News](#), which is referred to throughout, was a community newspaper published in Toronto in the area east of downtown in the 1970s and 1980s. Ulli Diemer was editor of Seven News from 1976 to 1981. Don Weitz frequently wrote articles for Seven News as well as for a number of other publications, including Phoenix Rising. For articles by Don Weitz see the [Seven News index](#) and the [Phoenix Rising index](#), both of which are online.

Ulli: No particular agenda... just wherever we go. But I do just want to ask you how you got involved in the first place. How did you come to realize there was injustice in the world and you ought to do something about it? Go back to the beginning, as it were.

Don: Well, by the time I got involved in *Seven News*, I had seen so much injustice in the psychiatric system when I used to work in it. I used to work at CAMH which at that time was called Queen Street Mental Health Centre, at Ossington and Queen. I left. I saw a lot of abuse and injustice in the early 1970s and then when I dropped out of the institution and psychology altogether, I thought I wanted to get involved in doing – getting active in – social justice stuff.

Ulli: And when you got into that, psychology, was that coming out of high school, university or ..?

Don: No, it was college. I had a job in Cleveland, that's where I was born, in Ohio in the '60s, but it wasn't until I took a job at Queen Street Mental Health Centre that I saw so much abuse in the psychiatric system that I felt I had to do something. I didn't get any from any support from any of the other psychologists – at that time I called myself a psychologist. I didn't get any support from the Chief Psychologist or anything in calling attention to the cold, wet torture of the pack, of the physically restraining device that they kept people in.

Ulli: Can you say a bit more about that? I don't know much about that.

Don: Well, it was banned six months after I resigned. There was a physically restraining device where the staff would wrap the so-called uncontrollable patients. Cold wet sheets to cool them down, literally. They'd reduce the temperature of the water and they soaked the sheets in the water and then wrapped them tight around the patients....

Ulli: Jesus...

Don: ... for hours at a time. And I spoke out, I said "What are you doing? This is not treatment, it's torture for God's sake. Stop it". And I wrote to the head of the therapeutic standards committee, I think his name was Dr. Hill at that time. Anyway, I was protesting, trying to get the nurses and the other psychologists involved and said, "Speak out!" And they wouldn't. They said, "Oh no Don, it's treatment. We have to do something..."

So in the summer of '72, just three months before I resigned, around that time they had wrapped 12 patients on one ward in eastern service, it was called, it's a wing of the hospital. I was very active and wrote a letter and circulated it inside to the staff. Nothing came of it except I got a "thank-you" and acknowledgement, a robotic type of letter from the head of therapeutic standards. I said, "This is not therapy, it's torture" and I said it in my letter. Didn't do a damn thing. That's one of the things that led to my resignation, I would have stayed and fought for the rest but I had no support from my so-called colleagues. I said, "they can go to hell." So I got the hell out and that's one of the main triggers or reasons why I wanted to get active. And I thought to myself, "This is injustice and abuse happening in a so-called treatment institution." So I wanted to get involved to see what I could do to help issues in the community.

At that time I think I lived close to Ward 7 and at one time I did live on Carlton. So then I met Norm Browne, somehow, and I wanted to start to do some writing. So he was very open to my priorities and wanted to do something. And then a year later I took a trip out to the west coast to Vancouver and I got interested in self-help groups that were fighting and trying to support and do some advocacy for people who were psychiatric survivors. At that time I didn't use the word psychiatric survivor, although I am one because I was locked up and drugged many, many years ago.

Ulli: Was that before Queen Street or...?

Don: ...In Boston. That was before I came to Canada in '62.going back to the 50s when I was...

Ulli: When were you born?

Don: 1930. So I'll be 86 in a couple of days...anyway, there we go.

Ulli: Happy birthday!

Don: Thank you (*laughs*) Anyway I wanted to combine writing and activism. And then I met Norm Brown who encouraged me. I guess he was open to have me submit stuff for *Seven News*.

Ulli: He lived in a rooming house, right ..?

Don: He did...

Ulli: So he was very tuned in to those kind of issues: people who were just marginally housed ...

Don: Marginalized... homeless... who had probably been in and out of psychiatric institutions... poverty , poor men. I think about that time I bumped into Barry Morse who you know, but I know we're in touch. He has the same birthday date as me. Barry, as you know is a street padre...United Church... street worker at that time.

Don: So he was very active and he was an influence on me getting involved in community projects, But mainly it was the injustices in the health care system that really got me going and so I felt I had to express myself and write out. So I started to write.

Ulli: Now when I got to know you, which I guess would have been when I was at *Seven News*, I associated you especially with *Phoenix Rising* and the antipsychiatry movement. Was that...?

Don: That came about in 1980

Ulli: Oh, so that was later...

Don: A few years after I got published... 1980 was the birth of *Phoenix Rising*, thanks to my late, close friend who I lived with, Carla McKague, the lawyer. Carla McKague and I started *Phoenix Rising* out of a two-bedroom apartment on Spadina and we laid out the magazine all the four issues of the first year in her apartment and we had an editorial committee of five. That was 1980.

Don: I can distinctly remember and she was the one who thought of giving it the title *Phoenix Rising*. This was to be a magazine, not a newsletter – a magazine an antipsychiatry – one of the first ones in Canada that spoke to the abuses, personal stories, the marginalization and the advocacy for psychiatric survivors. At that time we called them inmates, psychiatric inmates or ex-patients. But she was the one, really I credit her with being one of the main forces in getting the magazine off the ground. She was a first-rate editor herself besides being a lawyer. I met Carla in the Student Legal Aid program at Queen Street Mental Health Centre when she was helping people, helping patients get legal representation. The people were left alone and languishing in Queen Street and there was no advocacy whatever except for her and maybe one or two others in legal aid. So *Phoenix Rising* was one of the... I'm very proud of that magazine. It lasted for 10 years, 1980 to 1990. I wish... we got funding from different governmental agencies but we never solicited or got funds from the mental health agencies because we were against them. We weren't going to take a penny from the psychiatric system and we never did.

We could only hire one or two people on a grant. We sort of lived by grants. We got grants half the time...

Ulli: Tell me about it! (*pause*) It was a high-quality magazine, *Phoenix Rising*.

Don: Well, I like to think it was, yes. We have lots of copies. We have 3,000 copies in an archive, [psychiatric survivor archives](#) on Jarvis, it's at the Gerstein Centre. Anybody can go in, although they'd have to get permission, I guess, to see...

Ulli: Sure, make an appointment...

Don: The whole set, copies of every set. It's on the Web, it's [online](#), PDF files. Every one of the 32 issues. We produced 32 issues of *Phoenix Rising* in 10 years. The only reason we had to stop was because people were getting burnt out. We didn't have much money to pay but we had an editorial committee and it was totally run by psychiatric survivors. I'm very proud of that and we spoke out and we had a shock doctor list, we printed the names of physicians and their hospital affiliations. We exposed as much as we could around drugs and shock. We had special issues of prison issues, two or three women's issues. Irit Shimrat was our last editor. She's in Vancouver now. A super editor and a survivor herself and has spoken out. Just fearless and very, very, super-articulate about psychiatric abuses to this day.

Ulli: Is there still shock treatment?

Don: Oh yes! People are surprised, even professionals. It's still going on, especially at CAMH. The Clarke Institute which is part of CAMH, gives shock. Every general hospital, virtually every general hospital in Ontario gives shock. I have statistics...

Ulli: What's it supposed to be for?

Don: Well they claim it's for depression and prevents suicide. It's a bunch of lies, it's bullshit. There are many scientific studies that say it doesn't prevent suicide and people who get shock treatment get depressed again and they're worse off and have disabilities including permanent memory loss, which always occurs, and brain damage. But they don't want to abolish it. I got involved in the committee to stop electro-shock in Ontario. It was called the [Ontario Coalition to Stop Electro-Shock](#) with [Bonnie Burstow](#) who just gave a talk on antipsychiatry at the Toronto Reference Library the other day. She and I and a few others started this, wanted to stop shock treatment in Ontario, and we held protests and rallies but we...

Ulli: Do you know Michael Riordon? He's a writer. He used to write for the *Body Politic*. One of his experiences was early when he was young and realized he was homosexual, he went to one of these psychiatrists and was given shock therapy to cure him of homosexuality.

Don: That's what they did!

Ulli: And then later when he decided, "Yes, I'm gay and I'm proud to be gay," he went to a gay dance and the psychiatrist who had shocked him was at the gay dance – turns out he was gay himself – and he confronted him.

Don: And the psychiatrist was gay?

Ulli: The psychiatrist was gay and Michael confronted him and said, "What are you doing?" And he said, "Well I keep my personal life quite separate from my professional life".

Don: The old rationalization. It's bull.. But that's an interesting story because there was an exposé and we had, *Phoenix Rising* had, a special gay and lesbian issue. We had an article in that about shocking, a diary excerpt or personal account of a gay man who was talking about shock. That's what they did, and of course the psychiatrist classified being gay as a form of mental illness, homosexuality for God's sake, until they stopped it because of protest by gay and lesbian people. At that time trans wasn't on the radar that much, until recently. But it was mainly gay and lesbian women who protested this fraud and this abuse. Anyway we did a lot of advocacy through the magazine just as *Seven News* was, I felt, an advocate for a lot of poor people, marginalized people in Ward 7. I think it was one of the first in Canada.

Ulli: As far as I know it was one of the first and possibly only, community-owned, non-profit community papers.

Don: Oh I knew it was non-profit (laughs)

Ulli: For sure it was non-profit...

Don: You know about it! (pause) How long were you editor?

Ulli: I became editor in '76 and I guess through until about '81. So about 5 or 6 years and afterwards I was involved just writing articles.

Don: When was the last issue?

Ulli: '85, I believe.

Don: So it lasted ...

Ulli: 15 years.

Don: 15! I remember I met some incredible activists through *Seven News*.

Ulli: During this period of time when you were writing all those articles for *Seven News*, what were you doing for money? Because you sure weren't being paid for the articles...

Don: At one time I drove a cab in the '70s. Didn't last long, a year. Did I get unemployment? I must have got some unemployment insurance, a piddly amount, and I got some money from my family in the States. They sent me some money because I had a pretty well-off father who was an executive. So I was never, fortunately I was never homeless. But he didn't give a damn anyway about workers or the unions so I was never really close to my parents much and social justice was not on their agenda. I was probably labelled as a communist or socialist, and they didn't want anything to do with it. They were reformist Jews, very reformist, they only observed the high holidays. Anyway, I won't get into that. I'm reminded of a rant I've been writing about my family so I'm more into rants these days than to poetry. I wish I could write some poems but I seem to be more comfortable writing rants

Ulli: Have you written poetry?

Don: A few, not much. I'm not too comfortable. I'm not schooled or experienced. But I did write any poems while I was at *Seven News*. In *Phoenix Rising* we published quite a few poems by survivors, some of it written right in the belly of the beast. Right inside of the ward which was precious for us. We hung on and we solicited poems, any kind of creative writing, and that's one thing I'm proud of: that *Phoenix Rising* helped spark writing of survivors inside and as well as the prisons.

Ulli: Were you able to get it circulated inside the institutions?

Don: Yeah. Once the staff tried to confiscate the writings, an issue. They threw it in the waste basket. An issue of *Phoenix*. This was Queen Street Mental Health Centre. So we exposed that and we were able to visit people and cover inquests of deaths of people. There was a famous case. He [Aldo Alviani] died in 1980 at 18 or 19, I think. He wasn't shot by the cops, no, he died of an overdose in Queen Street. They drugged the hell out of him. And we got a hold of the record, somehow we had a deep-throat contact at Queen Street showing us the dosage by hour and he was overdosed 10 or 20 times more than he should have and he died. And then there was an inquest; friends wanted to make a play out of his life.

But we cover deaths, so the deaths of prisoners, psychiatric persons has been on my mind for many years and in fact, deaths in the health care system that either aren't covered or reported poorly or ignored by the corporate media, generally speaking.

Ulli: There are several articles in *Seven News* that you wrote that are about the death rate in the Don district.

Don: Yes. That's right. I started to expose that because the Don district, the Ward 7, had one of the highest death rates in the city, if not the highest. Because you were covering that or privy to that information. And it

lasted, right, for several years, right? I mean the high death rate in the Don district.

Ulli: Although to be honest, I have no idea what it is now. It might still be high.

Don: But in the '70s and '80s... So the struggle for people's-controlled health system, was on my mind when I joined the committee which I wrote about in *Seven News* which I'm glad you reminded me of, in an article that was published on the Don District health committee and that I got involved with, with some other people who were better connected than I was. We alerted some of the politicians that we should have, that there should be, a health centre. There was no health centres in Ontario, or very few. ...Community health centres... very few, if any in the '70s..

Ulli: Was Riverdale the first, do you know? In Toronto?

Don: That or the Don. Riverdale or the Don District Health Centre...

Ulli: So where was the Don?

Don: I think it was near what's now called the Regent Park health centre. I think it was in that area. I'm not sure of the street. It was down... it was south of Carleton.

Ulli: Was it Belshaw? Belshaw Place?

Don: Maybe it was. I can't remember the street, Ulli. When you were editor there was some articles about the health centre?

Ulli: Yeah, yeah. And I remember articles about the Regent Park health centre which was at a different location.

Don: It was in that area, Dundas, Parliament. It wasn't as far south as Queen or King. It was what was in, quote, Cabbagetown. But the committee that I was proud to be a part of, we worked for maybe at least a couple of years trying to energize community people, maybe some politicians to set it up, to get it established and eventually it did, got funding mainly from the city. Always a non-profit. But that was one of the first community health centres, with Riverdale, in Ontario. Right in Toronto.

Ulli: The first was in Sault-Ste. Marie.

Don: Wait a minute! That's right. The first one was Sault Ste. Marie, that was the model. That's right. That was mainly organized by union workers.

Ulli: And everybody chipped in some money to start it up.

Don: That's right!. Sault Ste. Marie was the first in Ontario. And we knew about it so that encouraged those of us who wanted to start something in Don District.

Ulli: I gather that some of the doctors in private practice were not happy about that because they saw it as competition.

Don: They were probably very contemptuous or cynical. There was a few – he's now head of the family centre, I met him, at St. George. I met him at the Bain Co-op where I used to live. He's a very down-to-earth guy and he's into social justice and fighting these days for free health care that should be covered for immigrants and refugees.

Ulli: Is that Phil Berger?

Don: That's right! God, I don't know why I blocked on that. Phil Berger! I met him a couple of weeks ago he was giving a talk and I met him at the co-op and I've always respected him. Not too many like him. There are very few doctors like Phil Berger who are working closely and respectful of people who have been marginalized by the health-care system. There are very few like him. I'd like to think I'm wrong.

I dislike the psychiatrists and always have since they almost killed me when I was locked up. Just as they're almost killing people today with their damn drugs. So I've been speaking out these days as far as the mental health system is about the fraud of mental illness 'cause its not an illness because people get rangy and so forth, but I don't want to get into that too much now but there's so many lies that are being told and repeated and propagated by the corporate media about mental illness, mental health and safe and effective antipsychotics and antidepressants. It's bullshit and it's dangerous bullshit. It's very dangerous what's going on these days and people are buying it and overdosing. Of course, the overdosing on fentanyl is bad enough, I mean that's addictive. But a lot of people don't know that a lot of the antidepressants and the so-called tranqs, the tranquillizers like the benzodiazepines are also addictive, like Librium and others. So I try to do what I can to speak out and, as you know, write angry letters. (*Laughs*) I don't write columns these days although once in a while I write a blog.

Ulli: Well you write pretty fiery letters! I see letters of yours in the *Star* every so often, like especially about Grassy Narrows and Aboriginal rights.

Don: I'm very upset about that because they've been poisoning ... government turned a blind eye. They've know about this for 25 to 30 years, about the mercury poisoning of indigenous First Nations people, and Grassy Narrows, and probably on other reserves which we don't know about. But Grassy Narrows is really, it's an uphill fight but it shouldn't be. It shouldn't be. The Wynne Liberal government is not getting the mercury out of the water and people's health is seriously suffering and there have probably been many, many deaths from mercury that have been covered up by the corporate media and the Ontario government officials including the ministers. People are dying, including kids, young kids, on Grassy Narrows.

So I felt I had to speak up. Death has been – death from doctors – death from the health care system. Health care! I should say the non-caring health care system, is a priority with me. I have to do it. I don't feel it's a choice. I feel compelled. I feel it's a moral obligation to speak out against abuse. Anybody that is aware of abuse by a doctor or a nurse or by anybody else who works in the system and is silent is guilty of complicity. I felt that when I resigned and didn't get any help, when they tied people up and tortured them with the Cold Wet Pack at Queen Street that I mentioned a little while ago, and I didn't get any help there. So since then I have felt the moral obligation to speak out against injustice particularly in the health care system.

Ulli: And are you part of a network of people? You're not the only one?

Don: Oh, god, god no. It's not like I'm doing this by myself. In the groups I've been associated with, that speak out and take action, social justice action. Well now I'm a member of OCAP – Ontario Coalition Against Poverty – for the last 15 years at least. Although not as active as I have been. But homeless is another thing high on my agenda when I speak out. I wrote a rant about it called Nameless Homeless which you may have heard. But anyway I read it on National Housing Day, read the whole thing aloud, it took me ten minutes and I'm glad they let me do it.

The Ontario Coalition to Stop Electro-shock, that was resistance against psychiatry, on our own. Psychiatric survivor archives, these are the groups I've been associated with. And of course the Coalition Against Psychiatric Assault -- CAPA. But I'm less active in that now. I let my hard-of-hearing bug me a little bit too much, if I may say that. I'm not as active, Ulli, as I used to be.

Ulli: I see you at a lot of demonstrations, though.

Don: I go to them but I don't go to meetings so much. Now what's on my agenda, I've been trying to get lawyers interested in organizing a national conference to abolish solitary confinement. I can't find any. I keep reaching out, I get a door slammed. It's like, I get no replies. There is a group that's an ad-hoc group of the Law Union of Ontario, students and lawyers, it's a lefty group. You may have heard of it. So they're going to present a resolution, I think, at the annual meeting in spring of 2017. But I wanted a conference. I don't want more paper. I mean, Jesus! We've had Ontario Human Rights Commission, Renu Mandhane, she recently released a very critical paper on solitary confinement, wanted it abolished. And I wrote to her, I said, "Good! Now how about a national conference?" I haven't gotten the replies that I was hoping for because there's solitary confinement going on in psychiatric institutions and I can't find a reporter who's willing to expose it.

Ulli: Have you tried the *Toronto Star*?

Don: Yeah, two or three reporters I wrote to them. *Now Magazine*, *Toronto Star*. I can't get anybody who wants to pick it up – to go in and look at how people are being locked up in solitary rooms on the psych ward, for god's sake, in a so-called treatment institution. This has been going on for years! Not to mention deaths that are covered up. Most of the deaths in prison occurred in solitary. You know about that famous, the woman, the 18 year-old...

Ulli: Ashley...?

Don: Ashley Smith! You see I have these so-called senior moments of blocking! So, well I wrote a blog about that that was published on Ashley Smith in solitary. Just thought I'd mention it to you. It's online, I think. But I just can't stand cover-ups and denials and outright lies by so-called experts whether they're psychiatrists, particularly psychiatrists, and other doctors and apologists for the health care system that don't want to take a look, a critical look, self-examination, of what the hell they're doing that endangers, endangers people's health. I can't stand these social workers also who may not be speaking out, who are witnesses, witnesses to abuse in shelters, women's shelters, men's shelters, men's wards, forensic wards in general hospitals and psychiatric prisons which I call psycho prisons. They don't want to. There's no whistle-blowers, Ulli! I consider you a whistle-blower but where are the others who are witnesses, right there on the front lines and they keep their damn mouths shut. I have no patience or respect for people like that. None! Because they are complicit in injustice and crimes. How long did it take to have a reconciliation commission, before the government...? I mean, we should have, not a reconciliation, we should have a national investigation commission into psychiatric crimes.

Bonnie Burstow, a good friend of mine and colleague who gave a speech two or three days ago on antipsychiatry. She's one of, she's the only academic who's been speaking out against psychiatry in Canada, publicly. The others, health professionals, know, "I know, Don. We have the odd problem, the odd death" – and they try to minimize and sanitize it. Not Bonnie! She goes straight in and her book should be required reading of all health professionals, called *Psychiatry and the Business of Madness*, just came out last year. And I wrote a review of it. She didn't have a chapter on the cover-ups, on the media cover-ups of psychiatric deaths. But I have written a piece on the corporate media sanitizing, on the corporate media's pro-psychiatry bias and Rob Wipond, who's an award-winning journalist -- I don't know if you've heard of him -- He's a first-rate journalist. He writes out of Vancouver.

Irit Shimrat who is the editor of *Phoenix* for the last four years, she knows how to....

He's one of the few investigative journalists who's speaking out against psychiatry and he does damn good work. He really documents it. He does his homework.

But I talked to the *Star* and of course I wouldn't bother with the damn *Globe and Mail* because they're so right-wing that they don't know what the word left means. They're so right-wing, they're in bed with the ruling elite, as you know, especially the business...

Anyway, I'm talking a long time, so ...

Ulli: That's what you're supposed to do! That's the concept of the interview!

Don: Maybe you have some questions. I've just been going on...

Ulli: I'm looking at your list of articles here. I'm just going to mention a couple. You've got something about a detox centre opening...

Don: Oh the detox!

Ulli: Were there no detox centres before that?

Don: I don't think so. This followed on the heels of my article about alcohol overdose being one of the major causes of death, at least in the Ward 7, and probably in other downtown areas. And I was calling and some others were calling, for a detox. I don't think we had one in the '70s, early '70s in Toronto. Did they have one when you were editor?

Ulli: It had recently opened. I think maybe 1974 or something like that.

Don: I'm not sure whether it was the east side, I can't remember whether that was in the Don or some other part of Toronto. I know it was downtown. Oh wait a minute – St. Mike's! We used to, Alf used to take them to the St. Mike's, that's right. St. Michael's Hospital had a detox, the first hospital, and Alf Jackson who was a legendary, legendary street worker, my very close friend who helped me when I was suicidal. Anyway, he used to take homeless men to them, in the middle of the night. He used to find them, two, three o'clock in the morning in the alleyways, in the laneways, and help them get to a detox. That's right! This was in the, well I know it was in the '80s and '90s, now I don't know whether it was in the '70s. But I think St. Mike's had one of the first detoxes in the community, and I'm pretty sure it's got to be on the east side. So I was very pleased so I felt I had to say something about it because a detox saves lives. People are near death sometimes, as you know, when they're taken there.

Ulli: I was going to ask you about this article too here, "Bury Me in Cabbagetown".

Don: I'm trying to remember... Do you have the article?

Don (looking at article): Pat Diem and Ralph Lomax. Oh they died of cancer, wait a minute – Roomers! They were roomers. (Pause) Pat was 51 when he died of cancer of the larynx. He was in Riverdale. Oh my god. This was about roomers who had died, lonely. So I focused on two men, Pat Diem, and Ralph Lomax. This was in '75, '76. I wrote about them. "Final Farewell to Two Old Friends". Both men, I said, lived and died hard, poor, alone, forgotten, and I ended the article with a poem: "And Death Shall Have No Dominion" as a title, as you probably know, by Dylan Thomas who's one of my favourite poets. And they were both vets, veterans, war veterans. So I was focused on them.

Ulli: So you're involved in OCAP now...

Don: Not as much as I used to although I go their events.

Ulli: I was going to ask you, over, what, thirty, forty years ago – have things gotten any better? Worse? In terms of homelessness, poverty, health care system?

Don: To tell you the truth, in some ways I think it's worse, Ulli. I really do. It's just not talked about or exposed enough by the corporate media including the *Star*. Although the *Star* sometimes has editorials, "Oh, we got to get rid of homelessness and blah, blah, blah" and mentioning the... But no, with Cathy Crowe who's much more of an activist and much more effective than I am as a nurse she is largely responsible for making homelessness a national issue with, Beric German, with the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee.

But homelessness is just as... I think is really worse. It really hasn't gotten appreciably better. We still have on an average of 5,000 people at any time in the shelters. That doesn't include 2-3,000 or more on the street. Many, many are psychiatric survivors who've been locked up at CAMH and other psycho prisons or in prisons in general, just thrown out: treated like garbage. There's still deaths happening that are not covered, that are not fully investigated by the coroners and they're not covered as much as they should. The Coroner of Ontario still doesn't keep a list of homeless deaths; that rankles me. I know Cathy Crowe is one of the people that got me more interested in homelessness. You know, she's written a book or so and has featured in a couple of videos by Shelly Saywell, an independent film director.

Deaths are still happening. Locking people up, people who are innocent, in both prisons and psycho prisons, that's going on, and of course the police brutality, against young black men in particular, is going on north and south of the border. But it certainly is happening a lot in Toronto, that's why I have a lot of respect for Black Lives Matter. I went to one of their demonstrations in the west end last year.

Ulli: I was going to ask you about prisons and psychiatric institutions. Back when I was editor of *Seven News* one of my jobs as the editor was also to deliver the paper. So I used to deliver a bundle into the Don Jail and I remember hearing at that time that half the people in there were mentally ill. They may have technically broken some law, but everybody breaks the law every day. So they got picked up for breaking some law and got locked up....

Don: And then labelled mentally ill with a bullshit, fraudulent diagnosis. I know Bonnie Burstow, who I mentioned earlier in this interview, visited somebody who was in the Don and labelled mentally ill. As a professional consultant she was allowed in to talk with somebody.

There's a lot of people who are labelled mentally ill but of course, I don't agree with or accept the term as legitimate. It's medically fraudulent because there's no physical, biological evidence of that; besides the mind cannot be ill. It's an abstraction. The thing is that that's one of the fastest ways to discredit people and to avoid looking at the real social causes of social injustices, but to blame it on a marginalized group. For example, people who shoot cops or shoot each other are labelled mentally ill.

You know there are a lot of similarities between regular prisons and psychiatric institutions. Both are total institutions. They both incarcerate, both lock up people, many of them are innocent, certainly in a psychiatric institution, and many, many more in regular prisons. And they both promote the use of force, forced treatment. They both stigmatize. So there's more similarities than differences.

Bonnie Burstow and I wrote a piece for Prisoner Justice Day that was circulated. It was a handout; it wasn't published, showing the similarities between prisons and psychiatric prisons. The similarities are very striking and both use solitary. And both promote the use of drugs which are very brain damaging.

Ulli: Now how about a label like schizophrenia?

Don: No, it doesn't ...I was labelled that. That's another fraud like ADHD. There's never been, it's not an illness, it's another fraudulent label. There's no biological basis for it. No one denies that people hear voices or say things that aren't true. In which case, why not call them lies or "sorry, what you're saying is not true" But when psychiatrists hear these lies they say you're deluded. It's a delusion. And they call delusions paranoia.

Ulli: OK Don, an example. I used to live in a communal house and this woman in the house had what was labelled a psychotic break, which I think is a label I would accept. And so, for example, she would look in the mirror in the bathroom and she would be seeing her father's face reflected in the mirror and start talking to her father as if her father was there. That's not a lie.

Don: No, no, no, that is not a lie. We call it maybe a misperception or whatever. She sees an image or a vision. So why not call it a vision, a misperception, a vision? She has a vision but it's not a symptom. It's not a symptom like diabetes, like low sugar in the blood can cause a coma or semi-coma, which, by the way, I went into once because they gave me too much insulin. But no, what I'm saying is that these things, these odd behaviours are sometimes frightening or sometimes very strange kind of speech or perceptions, these are not symptoms of any illness. This person can be very upset and strung out or anxious or panicky but they're not symptoms. There're lots of good reasons for people freaking out or having a quote, as you say, psychotic break: homelessness, breakup of a marriage, breakup of a partnership, being demoted, being abused sexually, physically. These are all legitimate and real reasons for people freaking out, and they do by the millions in every country. Because of sexual assault, physical assault or domestic violence is common, very common. Threats, flunking school or something, being demoted, a loss in the person's life. Who is the authority? It's the person who's the real authority on the loss but when they get into the mental, somehow they're railroaded, people who hear voices. I'm not denying it's real, what this person saw in the mirror was real to her, her father, so she had a vision which she was talking to, but you have to understand; this woman must have suffered a terrible loss or trauma. Trauma is a very common cause and there are all kinds. I just mentioned examples of trauma: losing a job, the death in the family, going through the war, a war zone, any war zone. But it's not mental illness, it's a trauma. It's a serious crisis, personal crisis in a person's life. We don't have the language, the media are to blame for not using common, everyday, emotionally meaningful language to describe people's crises. You go into a crisis? Oh, it's mental illness! It's bullshit! That's a failure to think critically. That's what I think and it isn't just me...

Ulli: But why are you unwilling to use the label "illness"?

Don: It's not an illness to imagine something that's not true or to see a vision in the mirror. It's not an illness. It's just a misperception or a vision. I think the indigenous people somehow are more accepting of visions than white than white people. They know a lot about visions. Some are frightening. Some are not. Some are uplifting.

Anyway, that's my take. I don't buy the medical model, which is what it's called, which Bonnie Burstow demolishes and Thomas Szasz who died recently, he was a psychiatrist, he wrote a book called *The Myth of Mental Illness* and he gets into this very issue that I talk about. *The Manufacture of Madness* is another title of a book where he critiques and he deconstructs, he deconstructs psychiatry and says, "This is a fraud".

And one of the biggest problems we have is the psychiatrization of children as young as two, three and four, as young as even babies, where they're labelled ... can you imagine a two or three-year-old being labelled depressed, for Christ's sake, and being given an antidepressant? And this is going on! It isn't just babies. There's teens, there are young adults and old people like myself. That's why I want to stay out of a nursing home because I know in nursing homes I would be very vulnerable to being prescribed a brain-damaging drug. And there's been an article about that by David Bruser in the *Star*, two or three articles about the psychiatric drugging for dementia in nursing homes. Dementia and neurological disease, that's a real disease, and they're giving psychiatric drugs.

Don: So what I'm saying, what's going on today in psychiatry and the mental health system is fraudulent and criminal. And there's very few, Ulli, reporters and editors that are on to it and expose it as fraud. Call it for what it is. They're making it up. And who benefits? It's the drug companies and the rich psychiatrists; those are the ones who benefit, not the patients. And people are dying from it!

Ulli: I agree with much of what you say...

Don: Well, you don't have to ... (*Laughs*)

Ulli: But at the same time: the fact that drug companies have a vested interest in pushing drugs and make a lot of money, that doesn't necessarily mean that some of the drugs don't work.

Don: No. The drugs, so-called antidepressants, there was a theory for many years that they were safe. They cause suicide now. Now it showed particularly the so-called newer brands that have been out for 10 to 15 years trigger suicidal thoughts and attempted suicide, and this is not me speaking. There's research, scientific research.

Ulli: That's Healy, right? David Healy?

Don: These are the antidepressants, they actually cause people mania and cause people to be homicidal and depressed to such an extent that people kill. There have been court cases about Paxil.

Ulli: I've heard of that. At the same time, personally I was on antidepressants for a couple of years. And I don't know whether it did any good or not but it didn't make me suicidal either.

Don: You were fortunate. If it wasn't one of the newer ones called SSRI's like Paxil or Prozac. But still those ones, there's about 7 or 8 that are equally dangerous that can trigger suicide. And the neuroleptics, the so-called antipsychotics don't combat anything called psychosis or schizophrenia. They brain damage and they control people and make people into zombies. It isn't just me, I know that you think I'm maybe exaggerating.

Ulli: We used to argue about this in the '70s.

Don: But now it took the medical profession, especially the ones who are not psychiatrists to come out and admit that many of these drugs are in fact dangerous and should never be prescribed. There's a book out by Peter Gotzsche, an Austrian-born or European-born neurologist, he's not a psychiatrist, with very strong critique of most of the psychiatric drugs because they're dangerous.

Bonnie has a good chapter, and Dr. Breggin, Peter Breggin in the United States who's been speaking out against drugs and shock and helped to get lobotomy stopped. They were lobotomizing veterans, the war veterans, in the States, and he almost single-handedly stopped the lobotomies for a while, though it's coming back. I know my cousin had a lobotomy. I once was on the phone for an hour trying to convince her to stop her suicide, tried to prevent her from killing herself, but I didn't succeed. But she was on the goddamned drugs and she was locked up for a while. I've had a niece, a niece and a cousin both psychiatrized, who killed themselves while on psychiatric drugs, "safe and effective" drugs.

So I'm just telling that this is an epidemic. They don't want to look at it. "Oh, it's mental illness. It's nothing that the doctors did – no, no, no!" Bullshit! It's a lie, goddamn lies, spewed by the psychiatric, by the mental health professionals and the Canadian Mental Health Association and all its branches in Canada that supports the medical model that I blame for much of the abuses and deaths going on, because they support the ideology that triggers the prescription of these drugs that harm. One of the key words that all physicians must take before they can call themselves doctors is from the Greek, Hippocrates: First, do no harm. Every time a doctor prescribes an antidepressant or a neuroleptic, they're doing harm. The fact that you escaped being suicidal, that is very fortunate but you were lucky. You were lucky and I was lucky too when they gave me insulin shock and they labelled me schizophrenic.

Ulli: The insulin... it was not for diabetes?

Don: No. The only legitimate use of insulin is for diabetes. The only legitimate medical use of insulin injections are for diabetes. Psychiatry was doing it for 25 years for schizophrenia, for "schizophrenia" quote. They were putting people into comas and calling it treatment in Canada and the United States. Who was the inventor of insulin?

Ulli: Banting and Best?

Don: He didn't speak out. I read an article or two in a scientific journal about Banting and insulin in psychiatry. He never spoke out against it.

Ulli: He died in 1941, right?

Don: They were giving insulin as a shock treatment in the '30s. It was invented in Europe and then it spread to Canada and the U.S. as a treatment, as a shock treatment. I had a sub-coma where they would stop it before I went into a coma. I had 110, and I suffered greatly, greatly. I was traumatized. I had panic attacks after I was released from hospital for the next few years. That's psychiatry. But I never had shock treatment. I never had electro shock, I'm glad to say. But I lived with people who had it, miserable. So what I'm saying is that if you don't die from psychiatric treatment you're fortunate but at the same time you're likely to be traumatized, especially when you're locked up and treated ... and I've visited and known too many. So I'm not as active as I was but as long as I can think and write, I will write letters and try to speak out as much as I can against the abuses and frauds.

I hope you weren't hurt by any of the drugs.

Ulli: It was one drug, I forget what it was but it was an antidepressant. But I'm not convinced of your position that all psychiatric drugs are bad.

Don: O.K., I'm not saying they're bad but there's a systemic ideology there that is not a credible critique.

Ulli: My position would be more like, they're way over-prescribed but that doesn't mean that there aren't situations for which they are appropriate.

Don: There are some. If you're on a drug, if you're on a tranquillizer for example, let's say benzodiazepine, like Librium, and some other benzodiazepines that they give, it's a muscle relaxant too. It was originally a muscle relaxant, a tranquillizer. Anyway, they can calm a person down. I'm talking about the tranquillizer, not talking about the antidepressants or the vicious neuroleptics, mislabelled antipsychotics because they don't combat psychosis. Two to three weeks maximum, if you're on one of these psychiatric drugs more, they're likely to do serious harm. If you're on it for weeks or months, then you're fortunate that you're doing very much OK.

Ulli: I'll give you another example from my personal experience. My nephew, my brother's son, committed suicide this past summer. He had been diagnosed as schizophrenic but refused to take medication and was

suffering from what I would call delusions. Like, he thought all sorts of people were following him, that cars were parked outside his home watching him, things which were not objectively true. It's a delusion that he had, and he became so afraid of all these people who he believed were following him that he killed himself. It seems to me that if he had been willing to take a psychiatric, an antischizophrenic drug, he might be alive today.

Don: That's a big "if", Ulli. I would call, what and many of us call delusions, it's essentially a false belief. I mean, a belief in something that's not true, OK. So it's medicalized as the delusions, as a symptom of schizophrenia. When the shrinks, psychiatrists get a hold of someone who imagines people are following him and that there's conspiracy, although there are conspiracies going on in our society. It's too bad that your nephew was apparently not involved in some kind of support group. Or was he?

Ulli: Didn't want to go to any; he didn't think he had a problem.

Don: He didn't have a problem, but he obviously did and ...

Ulli: But what he thought is that people were following him, not that he had a problem.

Don: I'm sorry that no one was able to get to him or convince him that that wasn't the case. It's easy for me to say that now, but there are lots of people with false beliefs, you know, lies, claim that there's a conspiracy and there's not, including Trump. The only thing that comes out of his mouth are lies and fraud and yet he's not locked up but if other people who are not so well known would say the same thing, they would be locked up.

Ulli: Yup

Don: This is always a very huge human problem of people saying things that aren't true. But the problem that I have, big problem, is when psychiatrists are involved that they either worsen the problem by seriously endangering the health of people by giving drugs that often cause brain damage and that includes the antidepressants. You don't have to believe me, there are experts and scientific papers that show that both the antidepressants, many of them as well as all the antipsychotics cause brain damage and other serious neuro-muscular disorders, real disorders.

Anyway, so I'm not here to convince you of my views on psychiatry, but I just have to say that because that's what I believe, based on the evidence that I've seen, based on what I've witnessed in life, so I have to say it.

Ulli: For sure!

Don: And I respect what you – disagreements or skepticism or whatever – that you have an absolute right to it. But I just hope that if you come across any kind of psychiatric abuse that somehow that will be exposed whether by yourself or somebody else because there's so much abuse, it's systemic.

Ulli: Well we've certainly got some articles and books on the Connexions website that address that.

Don: I'm glad to see that you list books ... you're very tech-savvy!

Ulli: The idea is, some people want an article and they want to read it now online; they can click on it. But some people want to do more research; they need books. So we try to provide that -- we don't have the book online but you can go to the library and get it.

Don: Or very good articles that have been critically acclaimed or accepted in the profession as being very ground-breaking.

Ulli: If you want to send some stuff along by email...

Don: I could send you just a list. I mean, I have an antipsychiatry bibliography that I could send. It's online. It's digitized. I don't claim it's totally comprehensive but there's an awful lot of books including those written by survivors, first-person accounts.

Don: So we sort of got off on psychiatry...

Ulli: That's fine. That's fine. I don't have any particular agenda. Like I said, I'm interested in how people see that there's injustice in the world, and feel they have to do something about it, and that's injustice motivated you and you felt compelled to do something about, so that's good.

Don: There's two main things that helped that, just to flag them: one was the lack of support and understanding of the torture at Queen Street Mental Health Centre in 1970, '71, '72 where I worked as a community psychologist. That was one. The other was what was happening, was what happened to me personally, much more personally when I was locked up and forcibly drugged with insulin where I went into a coma which I wasn't warned about and they shut me up and I was put on insulin. I was very anxious and talking against my parents who were terrible parents as far as I was concerned, who didn't really know what love was or couldn't give love, they were too interested in other stuff. So those two things, and then when I lived in Cabbagetown, when I lived in Ward 7 and saw, was a witness, heard about so many deaths on the street and the lack of decent health care. That was a third thing that helped get me going, encouraged me to speak out about injustice: the homelessness and deaths and lack of health care, which is still going on unfortunately, big time. And when you asked me if things are worse, I think in many ways they are because I think that we have a drug epidemic still that's not being addressed that is driven by poverty and homelessness and drugs.

Anyway, I just won't keep silent. I won't and I can't.

Ulli: Good for you!

Don: And I like to read [your newsletter](#) which keeps me angry enough (laughs) by exposing a lot of stuff and I wish you well with it.

Notes and References

Peter Breggin is an American psychiatrist and critic of shock treatment and psychiatric medication. In his books, he advocates replacing psychiatry's use of drugs and electroconvulsive therapy with psychotherapy, education, empathy, love, and broader human services,

Norman G. Browne was editor of *Seven News* from 1971 to 1976.

Bonnie Burstow is an academic, author, and anti-psychiatry activist.

Coalition Against Psychiatric Assault (CAPA) is an organization committed to dismantling the psychiatric system.

Cathy Crowe is a Toronto street nurse and social justice activist.

Grassy Narrows (Asubpeeschoseewagong First Nation) is an Ojibway First Nation in Northern Ontario. The First Nation experienced mercury poisoning from Dryden Chemical Company, a chloralkali process plant, located in Dryden, Ontario that supplied both sodium hydroxide and chlorine used in large amounts for bleaching paper during production for the Dryden Pulp and Paper Company. Dryden Chemical company discharged their effluent into the Wabigoon-English River system. It was estimated that over 9,000 kg of mercury had been dumped by the company into the Wabigoon-English river system between 1962 and 1970. After decades of stonewalling, in June 2017, the Ontario government finally pledged \$85 million to clean up the industrial mercury contamination.

David Healy is a professor of psychiatry, psychiatrist, psychopharmacologist, scientist and author. His main areas of research are the contribution of antidepressants to suicide, conflict of interest between pharmaceutical companies and academic medicine, and the history of pharmacology.

Alf Jackson was a street worker in the Ward 7/Cabbagetown area.

Barry Morse was a street worker in the Ward 7/Cabbagetown area.

Ontario Coalition Against Poverty (OCAP) is a direct-action anti-poverty organization based in Toronto.

Ontario Coalition To Stop Electroshock worked to abolish the procedure known as "Electroconvulsive Therapy," which it characterized as a form of torture against psychiatric inmates.

Other Voices is the free newsletter published by Connexions.

Phoenix Rising was an anti-psychiatry magazine published from 1980 to 1990. All issues published have been digitized and are available online in the [Psychiatric Survivor Archive](#).

Seven News was a community newspaper published in Toronto in the area east of downtown in the 1970s and 1980s. **Ulli Diemer** was editor of Seven News from 1976 to 1981. **Don Weitz** frequently wrote articles for Seven News.

Thomas Szasz was a Hungarian-American academic, psychiatrist and psychoanalyst. He was best known as a social critic of the moral and scientific foundations of psychiatry.

Toronto Disaster Relief Committee was a group of social policy, health care and housing experts, academics, business people, community health workers, social workers, AIDS activists, anti-poverty activists, people with homelessness experience, and members of the faith community who declared homelessness a national disaster. It was active from 1998 to 2012.

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