

Volunteers: A legacy of commitment and care

By Margaret Goulding

Volunteers scurried about the hospital halls, brimming with excitement and energy as they helped put the final touches on an event they had been planning for months. An event for the patients; an evening of fun and entertainment and an opportunity for them to engage with each other, the staff and the volunteers. Patients were invited to sit, relax and enjoy the show, while volunteers kept busy serving an array of refreshments and tasty treats. This wonderful event, planned by the community volunteers, was meant to provide a diversion from the clinical environment and help the patients get their minds off things.

If this volunteer event sounds a little dated, it is. This event took place in 1892, over 116 years ago, at the Queen Street site of the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) – what was then called the ‘Provincial Asylum for the Insane.’ Today, more than 700 volunteers provide a different kind of energy and involvement with patients with mental illness and addictions at CAMH. These volunteers inspire clients and families by providing peer support, tutoring, facilitating arts, producing special events, playing sports, leading skills-sharing workshops and gardening, as well as assisting in research that may one day change clients’ lives.

In the past year, a new corporate volunteer program has brought employees from a wide variety of industries – communications, finance, tourism and hospitality, property management, architecture, and the public sector – to improve CAMH’s environment, donate materials, and deliver special programming to clients. Whether it was to play basketball with students in CAMH’s Toronto District Secondary School located at the College Street site, flip pancakes at a Valentine’s Day breakfast, help out at the ‘Suits Me Fine’

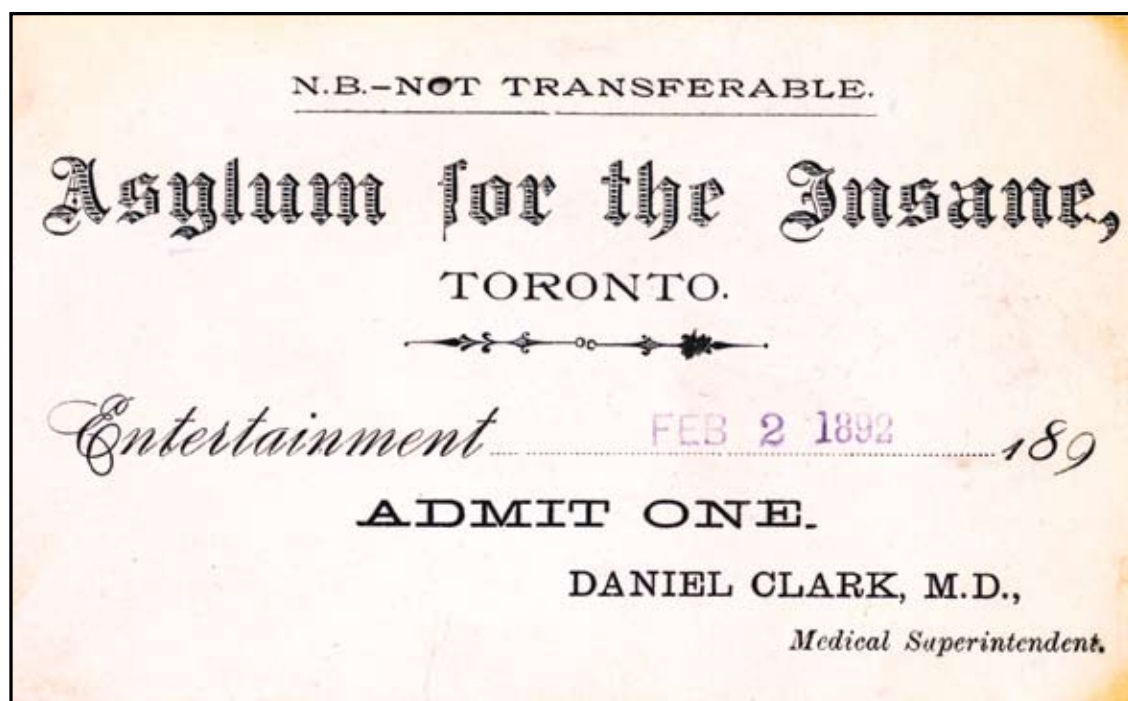
clothing service for clients, or beautify a garden, the corporate volunteer program has gone a long way to reduce stigma about mental health and addictions and the hospital. The program serves as an introduction to CAMH, and many people continue to volunteer individually.

Former client Frank Nelson was inspired to offer his math skills to tutor 14 students who attend CAMH’s high school. Frank’s motivation for volunteering is simple: “It’s a state of giving that makes me feel good about myself,” he says of his involvement with the program, where the challenge is finding the appropriate learning level for students spanning ages from late teens to early twenties.

He adds: “It’s a great way to keep your mind active and positive.” The volunteer program has proven so valuable that Frank now actively encourages his friends to get involved.

In June, the province of Ontario honoured 208 volunteers from the Toronto region at the Annual Volunteer Service Awards; among them were six of CAMH’s very own. Niles Patel was recognized for his five years of volunteer work with the Telephone Support Line at CAMH’s McLaughlin Information Centre, offering informal support to those who are struggling with mental health or addiction issues. His commitment and passion for his volunteer work caught the attention of the staff there, and Niles soon moved from the ranks of volunteer to a CAMH employee.

Also recognized were CAMH Family Resource Centre volunteers Annick Aubert, Ana Herman, Joan MacDonald, and Elsa Southam. The women use their personal experience to support and help families and friends to navigate the emotional and sometimes stressful journey of loving and/or caring for someone with a mental health and/or addiction issue. Former staff member and current volunteer at the ‘Suits Me Fine’ Boutique, Pauline



Ticket to a concert for Asylum patients on February 2, 1892, donated to the CAMH Archives by Mrs. Shirley Scott.

Hill also garnered an award for her commitment to helping clients. She joined CAMH Volunteer Resources soon after she retired, and has been helping CAMH patients with their clothing needs for 15 years.

The legacy of care and commitment by CAMH volunteers

is a long and storied one. For over 100 years, volunteers – with their helping hearts, abounding compassion, empathy and understanding – have been able to help improve the quality of life for clients.

If you’re interested in volunteering at CAMH, or know

someone who is, contact the Director of Volunteer Resources at (416) 535-8501 ext. 4053.

Margaret Goulding is the External Communications Coordinator at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH).



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