

Judi Chamberlin (1944–2010)

Judi Chamberlin, who has died at home, aged 65, after a long struggle with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, was the *grande dame* of psychiatric survivors. She kick-started what became known as ‘Mad Pride’ in the mid-1970s, publishing her ground-breaking book *On Our Own: Patient-Controlled Alternatives to the Mental Health System* in 1978.

Originally from Brooklyn, New York City, Judi was committed to Rockland Hospital in New York State as a ‘schizophrenic’ in the mid-1960s, following a miscarriage when she was 21. She wrote later that ‘my depression might be telling me something about my own life was a possibility no one considered, including me’. That experience left her feeling demoralised and after she was discharged, Judi felt completely worthless.

Fighting for freedom

However, her sense of hopelessness was mixed with powerful fantasies, in which she imagined herself and other former ‘patients’ burning down the hospital—joining hands and dancing round the bonfire of oppression. Such fantasies kindled the spark of Judi’s recovery, which blossomed in a crisis centre in Vancouver, Canada, run by former ‘patients’ who had won government funding to develop alternative forms of support.

Judi recalled that when she had tried to express her anger in hospital, she was either drugged or secluded, and that she turned to the American Civil Liberties Union for support. Later she recalled: ‘When I asked for help in fighting for my freedom, it seemed that freedom was not something that “mental patients” deserved.’ Over time Judi realised that freedom was the key and that if she was not to be ‘given’ her civil rights, she would need to work out a way to get them for herself.

Although Judi did not campaign against the use of psychiatric drugs, she found no personal use for them, preferring instead the timeless value of human support. This led to her part in helping to create the Mental Patients Liberation Front in Boston, Massachusetts, in the early 1970s. She famously blocked the doors at the 1980 conference of the American Psychiatric Association in San Francisco, California, by linking arms with a large group of her colleagues. Delegates had to sneak in through a side door to avoid the protest, and Judi’s campaign for genuine advocacy had begun. There was to be no turning back.

She went on to establish a drop-in centre in 1985, run by people with experience of ‘mental illness’. This became the model for the ‘survivor-led’ alternative, she had long dreamed of.

Judi became one of the leading lights



at the National Empowerment Center in Boston, along with Dan Fisher and Pat Deegan. Among her many awards and accolades, she received the President’s Distinguished Service Award in 1992, from the President’s Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities.

Despite her fame as a firebrand, in private Judi was quiet and unassuming. Rather than have a memorial service after her death, she invited her friends and colleagues to a living memorial at Boston University weeks before she died. From her wheelchair, Judi launched a call for the rights of hospice patients to home care. The flame may have been flickering but the passion for rights and justice still burned brightly.

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