

# Road to recovery rarely smooth

By **STEPHEN ROW**  
Staff Writer

The road to recovery from mental illness is seldom a smooth one.

Consumers frequently have to cope with misdiagnoses, inept care, health insurance companies who deny care, and the social stigma which accompanies the illness.

Also one has to battle anosognosia (Greek: a-not, noso-disease, gnosisknowledge), a neurological condition — first discovered in stroke victims — where the patient doesn't know, and thus denies, they are ill.

With persistence and the help of advocacy groups people consumers have found help and realized that — while their condition is not presently curable — mental illness does not mean they cannot live a happy and fulfilling life.

Audrey's story — the person featured today in *The Trentonian's* series recognizing Mental Health

Awareness Week — reflects both the heartache and the triumph that comes in coping with mental illness.

As a young woman, Audrey was bent on a successful career as a teacher. While attending Jersey State Teachers College — now New Jersey City University — she worked in Asbury Park.

"I paid my way through college working as a telephone operator," she said.

The frenetic pace of working as an operator was difficult, but Audrey persevered and after graduating, embarked on her career as a schoolteacher.

Then at age 27 her bipolar symptoms emerged.

"I had manic symptoms at work," Audrey said, remembering the letters she wrote to a friend during downtime at work.

"Every letter was a different color from felt-tip pens," she said.

Her symptoms continued unchecked for nearly five years until, after two suicide attempts, she was hospitalized.

"I felt lower than whale dung," she said.

Her treating physician gave her an injection of sodium amitol, a drug not unlike sodium pentathol.

"My psychiatrist was totally incompetent," she said, recalling her trips from her home in Lindenhurst to Union City to get her injection.

"I was becoming totally addicted, because I wasn't sleeping."

The only sleep Audrey did get was the "five minutes" she spent unconscious in the doctor's office after her injection.

Audrey was hospitalized again, in 1977, after overdosing on drugs and alcohol, and had to have her stomach pumped.

She was also given insulin shock therapy, a practice developed in the

1920s where a seizure is induced with an overdose of insulin. The practice has been abandoned in most hospitals, due to the deleterious side-effects and the advent of electro-convulsive shock therapy.

The following year, Audrey quit her job at the school.

"I gave up teaching because I didn't trust myself," she said, fighting back tears because she still misses the children. "I thought the kids would blame themselves if I hurt myself."

Audrey was given a variety of medications, including lithium and Depakote.

She also found work in a library. She worked there over 15 years until, in 1995 she was hospitalized again.

"The meds never worked," she said, adding that instead of stabilizing her moods, they threw her into a manic state.

"I never had such rages before." Meanwhile, Audrey had to battle the bureaucracy which often punishes the mentally ill rather than giving them the support they need.

After quitting her teaching job in 1978, she worked in an occupational therapy program, doing such jobs as stuffing envelopes for Easter Seals.

The government decided she was earning too much and cut off her Social Security benefits.

"My SSDI was terminated because I earned \$15 a week at the shelter workshop."

One serendipitous benefit of the



Trentonian Photo/STEPHEN ROW

Audrey (left), a former schoolteacher, with her friend Gigi, now works with an Alzheimer's patient and assists other people with mental illness.

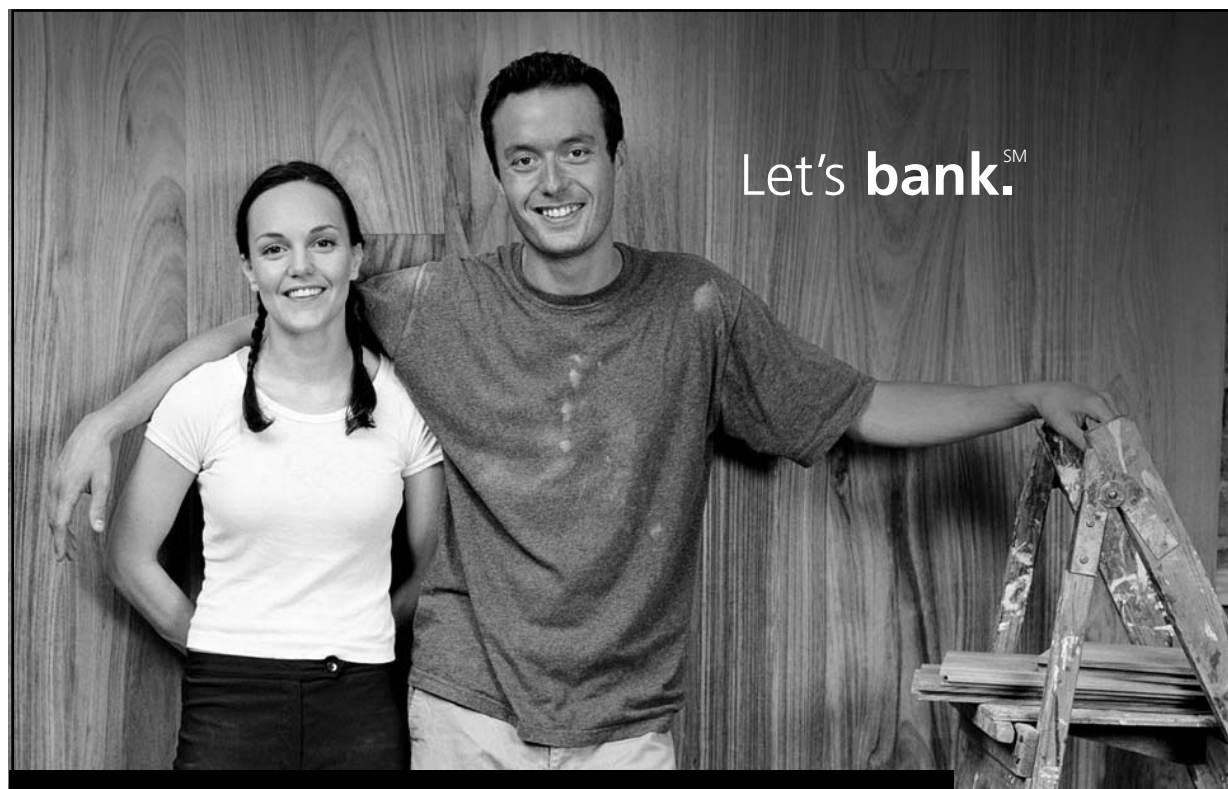
workshop was her husband of 25 years, another consumer whom she met while in the program.

Today, Audrey works as a companion for an 87-year-old Alzheimer's patient. It's not the same as teaching but it does give her some of the same satisfaction.

"I use my teaching skills," she said smiling. "She (her 87-year-old patient) sometimes says, 'I'm not going to play those kids' games,' but I take out a game and start playing by myself and she gets interested."

She also volunteers for NAMI's peer-to-peer program, helping other mental health consumers.

She also takes care of a house full of cats and works in a neutering program for strays.



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