

The New York Times**Health****Ex-Patient Is State Hospital Official**

AP
Published: November 27, 1988

A woman who was misdiagnosed and kept in a state mental hospital for more than 15 years has returned to the hospital as a full-time administrator. She has earned a master's degree at Harvard.

Marie Balter was 16 and clinically depressed when she was diagnosed as schizophrenic and sent to Danvers State Hospital. She was released in 1966 and went back to school; she has since then worked with psychiatric patients, given lectures around the country, and written an autobiography.

Now Mrs. Balter, who is 58 years old, is devoting her efforts to helping improve the hospital. She began work as community affairs director earlier this month.

"I wouldn't have grown one bit if I didn't learn to forgive," she said in a recent interview. "If you don't forgive your parents or your children or yourself you don't get beyond that anger.

"Forgiving is a way of reaching out from a bad past and heading out to a more positive future." 'A Model for Many People'

Marvin M. McNally hired Mrs. Balter three months into his tenure as Danvers' chief operating officer.

"She is a model for many people," Mr. McNally said. "I think she serves in that way for many people - not just ex-patients. She has faced adversity, has overcome it and has succeeded."

She was born in Boston to an alcoholic mother and was adopted by a couple in Gloucester who disciplined her harshly, sometimes locking her in the cellar. Increasingly depressed, she was institutionalized in 1947 with symptoms that included muscle spasms, choking, hyperventilation and hallucinations. Mrs. Balter said she later learned she had suffered from a form of depression and panic disorder, not schizophrenia.

"It wasn't deliberate on the part of the doctors and the hospital," she said. "Not much was known about panic disorders back then. A person who had panic disorders was identified as a little bit crazy."

Her recovery was painful and gradual, as she overcame a despair that often left her unable to eat or move. She contemplated suicide more than once.

Mrs. Balter credits her turnaround her own strength bolstered with the help of friends, mental health workers and her Catholic faith for her release.

After her release, married Joseph Balter, an accountant. He died suddenly, of a blood clot, as she studied for final examinations at Salem State College, where she earned a degree in psychology. She went on to earn a master's from Harvard in administration, planning and public policy. Patient Conditions a Priority

In her new job, Mrs. Balter will serve as chief hospital spokeswoman, help train health workers, recruit volunteers, find grants and assist in fund raising - "things that will help the hospital turn around," she said.

Above all, Mrs. Balter said, she hopes to improve patient conditions, from adding curtains to reducing overcrowding. Danvers has about 260 patients, twice its recommended capacity.

This is not Mrs. Balter's first return to the hospital in Danvers, a suburb north of Boston: from 1976 to 1979 she was a social worker on community outreach cases and has run a mental health program linked with Danvers.

Two years ago a television movie about her experiences, "Nobody's Child," aired and since then Mrs. Balter has lectured nationwide. Her book, "Sing No Sad Songs," was finished last year and she has marketed it herself to raise money for the Balter Institute, a nonprofit community mental health training center.

She plans to continue taking her message of hope, self-reliance and caring to high schools, community groups and mental health organizations.

"I don't believe on focusing on all the bad stuff that might have happened," Mrs. Balter said. "Everybody has problems. Life is not trouble-free. I try to make people see that."

[Home](#) | [Times topics](#) | [Member Center](#)

[Copyright 2011](#) The New York Times Company | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#) | [Index by Keyword](#)