

Stepping out from the shadows

19th annual 'Walk the World for Schizophrenia' aims to remove the negative stereotyping surrounding mental illness.

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Imagine feeling as though you're listening to 10 different radio stations at once, but none of them are tuned to the right frequency.

Imagine feeling as though there's an ever-widening gap between you and the rest of the world, but not knowing how to stop it from spreading.

Imagine feeling ashamed, confused, and completely alone.

When an individual is experiencing the early symptoms of mental illness they often don't know where to turn for help. It can be the darkest period in a person's life, but because of the negative stereotyping surrounding mental illness, they may put off seeking treatment in an effort to seem "normal."

This Sunday (June 27), the North Shore Schizophrenia Society hopes to reduce the stigma surrounding mental illness by holding its 19th annual Walk the World for Schizophrenia awareness event.

The walk, which begins at 10 a.m. at West Vancouver's John Lawson Park, is an outreach campaign in which the society's members and their family, friends, and supporters take to the Sea Walk pathway with leaflets and smiles.

"The idea is to expose people to (schizo-

phrenia) so that it's less frightening, mysterious and misunderstood," says Cheryl Olney, executive director of the society.

"It's about being out there in the open, wearing a shirt that says schizophrenia with no shame or stigma."

Olney says Sunday's walk is the organization's biggest awareness event for the year. Although it's not primarily a fundraising event, donations will be accepted if the public wishes to pledge support. The main goal, however, is to get people talking openly about mental illness.

This year's event will kick off with music from the West Vancouver Adult Pops Band starting at 9:30 a.m., followed by some opening remarks from District of North Vancouver Mayor Richard Walton. The walk then departs from the park at 10 a.m. and heads along the Sea Walk to Dundarave Pier. The public is encouraged to join and help distribute leaflets and information.

While understanding about mental illness has increased in Canada over the past few decades, Olney says there are still some common mis-

conceptions that continue to be perpetuated. "I find portrayals (of schizophrenia sufferers) in the media and on television tends to be more toward the split personality or 'evil genius,' which simply isn't the case," she says. "People who are being properly treated for schizophrenia are no more violent than the average person. In fact, people with mental illnesses often tend to be the victims of violence, not the perpetrators."

Olney's hope is that increasing awareness about mental illness will make it less likely for people to shy away from those who have been diagnosed. Ensuring people get the proper treatment is also of top concern for the society.

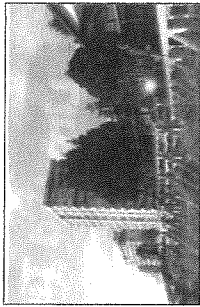
"Our focus is to make sure that people get into treatment when it's appropriate. It's only when people aren't in treatment that behaviour can become unpredictable," she says.

Like many other chronic illnesses, the earlier schizophrenia is diagnosed and treated, the better the recovery level.

Those interested in more information on mental illness or the work of the North Shore Schizophrenia Society are urged to call the family support centre at 604-926-0856.

More information about Sunday's walk is also available on the society's website at www.northshoreschizophrenia.org.

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