

Suman Fernando reports on a day centre with a difference for 'people of colour' in Toronto

Across boundaries

Until the early 1970s Toronto was largely composed of 'white' people from Europe who had displaced and marginalised the indigenous 'first nations'. Since then, however, the ethnic mix of Toronto has changed remarkably. Now, over 50 per cent of the population of Toronto claim descent from outside of Europe, especially India, Pakistan, the West Indies and China. In fact, Toronto has one of the biggest Chinatowns in the Western world. The earlier approach aimed at assimilating newcomers into being (European) Canadians has given way to a policy of 'multiculturalism'. However, as in the UK, it is only recently that the need to confront racism has been recognised.

In the early 1990s, a group of health workers, alarmed at the inequities – and worse – suffered by people in the mental health system (both workers and 'patients') who were perceived as 'non-white', decided to do something to rectify matters by starting a centre, Across Boundaries. (One of the founders, Martha Ocampo, is now a co-director.) Although it had become more widely accepted in the UK that black people were over-represented among those compulsorily detained, over-medicated, over-diagnosed as 'schizophrenic' and so on, such issues had gained very little prominence in Toronto at the time. But it was not difficult to persuade the Ministry of Health that what had been reported in UK was applicable in Toronto too. The Chinese community of Toronto already had a project (Hong Fook Mental Health Association) and so a sympathetic ear was found at the Ministry of Health for starting an ethnospecific mental health project for 'people of colour'. Across Boundaries opened its doors in 1995 as Toronto's first ethnorracial mental health centre.

Basically, Across Boundaries is a day centre – but with a difference. It is staffed entirely by South Asian, African and Caribbean people; all Canadians 'of colour'. Currently, there are two co-directors and six full-time programme staff from various professional backgrounds – mental health nursing, social work and community work. The clients come from greater Toronto, either through self-referral (having heard about the centre through community networks) or referral from hospitals, service providers, family members and sometimes psychiatrists.

Each client has a case manager who works with the client and his/her relatives to agree a programme to be followed at the centre, as well as an outline of the aims of therapy. Nearly all the clients who attend Across Boundaries either have, or would have if they saw a psychiatrist, a diagnosis indicating serious mental illness. In fact, the conditions of funding require this. But the approach to mental health at Across Boundaries is far from 'medical' in the narrow sense. There are many opportunities for everyone, staff and clients alike, to join in larger group meetings, and small ad hoc groups are created depending on need. Art therapy and creative expression are complemented by computer and other skills training, all supervised by specialists in the respective fields. Individual counselling and complementary therapies are also available, including therapies based on Ayurveda



(an Indian system of medicine) and Traditional Chinese Medicine. Families of clients are encouraged to be involved at the centre and sometimes specific family support is provided on an outreach basis.

But the main reason for the success of Across Boundaries derives from the spirit or ethos that pervades everything. The enthusiasm and commitment of the staff is palpable even to a visitor. Its brochure states: 'We believe the way to multiculturalism is through anti-racism'. And undoubtedly, there is a determined effort to promote understanding of racism, with discussions on strategies to counteract and cope with racist systems in society, including the psychiatric system. Meanwhile, multiculturalism is promoted directly by, for example, discussion of cultural differences, provision of culturally diverse foods and, of course, by celebrating cultural events. Incidentally, an important sideline that generates a little income has been a commercially viable 'ethnic' food catering service for meetings.

The board of directors includes a cross-section of Toronto's Canadian ethnic communities, and includes several people who are users of mental health services. Across Boundaries is not just reaching out across ethnic divides; it is also developing a unique system of holistic mental health while at the same time addressing racism. It has become a centre of excellence in Toronto's mental health scene and is extending into consultancy and community research. It has already produced several publications – for example, *The Healing Journey* and *Implementing the Anti-Racist Framework* – and an award winning video, *Hear What We Are Saying*, about stemming racism in the mental health sector. However, like all projects in the voluntary sector funding is always a source of worry, but so far this appears to be secure. And long may that continue!

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