

HUMAN RIGHTS



ALERT

January 5, 2000

ISSUE # 7

A Psychiatric Survival Broadsheet

ONTARIO Survivors become targets of hate crimes

On the evening of December 22, 1999 47-year old Michael Wilson was walking near his home in the Sherbourne St./Lakeshore Blvd. area when he found himself surrounded by as many as five young men who punched and kicked him, then apparently sprayed him with a flammable substance before setting him ablaze.

It was only by remarkable coincidence that Toronto's District Fire Chief happened to be driving past immediately after this attack, spotting what he first thought was a rubbish fire until he saw movement. He jumped from his car and used his coat to smother the flames engulfing Wilson, suffering burns to his own hands and arms in the process.

Focus on mental state

The initial media focus was on the information that Michael Wilson had 'a history of mental illness' and there was speculation that he may have actually set himself alight. It was only when witnesses came forward confirming the presence of the several younger men that police recognized that an assault had occurred. (In addition to severe burns Wilson also suffered other traumatic injuries that were consistent with a beating).

Much more insidious was a series of articles appearing in the Globe and Mail over the five-day period ending on New Year's Day 2000. The thrust of these four editorials (three of which were written by Sean Fine, the other being an anonymously published op/ed piece) suggested in no uncertain terms that the real culprit in this attack was Wilson's 'untreated mental illness' and that the assault could have been prevented if he (the *victim* of this assault!) could have been subjected to forced drugging!

The Globe and Mail articles went on to paint a detailed, sordid picture of Wilson's supposed mental deterioration over the months previous to the crime, including information that he had been twice apprehended by the police under the Mental Health Act in December alone.

Beaten to death

Less than six weeks earlier, in November 1999, forty-three year old Joey Pace was brutally beaten and kicked to death by two young men under a bridge in Oshawa, Ontario after leaving a coffee shop.

Pace, who was homeless, had apparently been enjoying a quiet cup of coffee when a waitress took exception to his physical appearance and demeanor, and called a friend for 'backup.' This friend and another man followed Pace as he left the establishment, subsequently attacking him

under the 401 a mile or so away. Two men were later arrested and charged with second-degree murder.

An article appearing in the Toronto Sun a couple of weeks later indicated that Pace had been diagnosed 'paranoid schizophrenic' and featured interviews where members of his family lamented the fact they couldn't compel him to seek treatment, suggesting that forced psychiatric intervention might have successfully altered whatever behaviors Pace was displaying that allegedly triggered the attack. (No mention was made of whatever mental processes might have motivated the *killers*. Joey Pace himself had no criminal record or history of violence).

Victim-blaming

This amounts to an insidious and disgraceful exercise in victim-blaming, made all the worse due to its masquerading as compassion.

All this distorted media has set the stage for groups such as the Schizophrenia Society of Ontario to essentially blame untreated 'mental illness' for whatever unfortunate circumstances which might befall survivors, whether it be the relatively uncommon situations where persons with a psychiatric diagnosis commit acts of violence, or the much more likely scenario where such individuals themselves become the victims of

<Hate Crimes - next page>

SURVIVORS' RIGHTS ARE HUMAN RIGHTS!

<Hate Crimes - continued>

serious attacks. Such attitudes create a vicious catch-22 situation for anyone with a label of 'mental illness' and are being used to justify forced interventions into survivors' lives on just about any pretext.

Implicit in all this is the sense that society is becoming increasingly intolerant of any norm-violating behaviors and ways of physically presenting one's self to the world, and even overt displays of strong feeling - with official policies themselves coming to reflect such attitudes.

As history proves, it is usually only a matter of time before someone takes it upon themselves to bring this full circle by translating such official policies into violent action against those who are seen as not conforming.

It is also true that when the media portrays survivors' lives in a distorted or sensationalized manner, and psychiatric professionals attempt to define every aspect of our humanity in terms of abnormal pathology, they end up becoming directly complicit in this violence.

Rather than fueling the call for more coercive powers under the Mental Health Act, the attacks on Michael Wilson and Joey Pace need to serve as a wake-up call about society's attitudes towards anyone who appears 'different.' A concerted challenge needs to be mounted against public policies and beliefs that wind up portraying certain individuals as being somehow 'other' than human and thus unworthy of even basic rights and freedoms.

Major victories over pro-force agenda!

CALIFORNIA

Introduction of legislation that would have greatly increased psychiatry's right to forcibly intervene into peoples' lives has been indefinitely postponed.

AB 1028, which would have allowed for psychiatric assessments to be

ordered on almost any pretext (simply denying one has a 'mental illness' or refusal of psychiatric drugs would have sufficed) was introduced - and subsequently withdrawn - by State Representative (and former psychiatric nurse) Helen Thomson.

In addition to drastically loosening the criteria for involuntary commitment, this legislation would have doubled the initial inpatient assessment period from 14 to 28 days, with an additional requirement that patients sign a form consenting to mandatory treatment for a minimum period of one year in order to be released.

Whether pressure from survivors and human rights advocates was responsible or it was merely that Thomson discovered there were insufficient votes to ensure passage of this bill, some breathing room has been allowed in what is sure to be a protracted struggle. Watch for a modified version of this legislation to be introduced in the future.

VERMONT

The outpatient committal law which came into effect in Vermont on July 1, 1998 has been dealt a severe blow by the state's Superior Court which has upheld an earlier decree around consent to treatment.

The State of Vermont had made a motion to the court to vacate this 14-year old ruling which provided very limited, specific guidelines under which a person could be involuntarily medicated. Known as the J.L. Consent Decree, it became a landmark ruling in the development of Vermont law concerning involuntary mental health treatment.

In a ruling made on Dec. 30, 1999, Superior Court judge Mary Miles Teachout denied the State's petition to allow the earlier decree to be overridden by provisions in the new legislation.

Teachout went on to say that in their attempt to vacate the earlier ruling, the proponents of the new law had failed to meet two requirements - one being to prove there had been a sig-

nificant change in circumstances that suggested modifications to the law were warranted; and the other being that the proposed modifications would properly address these changed circumstances.

Psychiatric Survivor Resources in Toronto

People Against Coercive Treatment

P: 760-2795 F: 368-5984

Internet: <pact@tao.ca>

<www.tao.ca/~pact>

Queen Street Patient's Council

Room 2059, 1001 Queen St. W.

Toronto, Ontario M6J 1H4

P: 535-8501x2018 F: 325-9749

<patientsco@icomm.ca>

<www.icomm.ca/patientsco>

No Force! Coalition

(c/o Queen Street Patient's Council)

<www.tao.ca/~pact/noforce.html>

Sound Times Support Services

96 Granby St.

Toronto, Ontario

Phone/fax: (416) 979-1700

E-mail: <stimes@icomm.ca>

<www.icomm.ca/stimes>

C/S Information Resource Centre

c/o Day Centre

252 College St. 3rd Floor

Toronto, Ontario M5T 1R8

P: 595-2882 F: 595-0291

E-mail: <csinfo@icomm.ca>

<www.icomm.ca/csinfo>

HUMAN RIGHTS ALERT

319 Dundas St. E. #408

Toronto, Ontario M5A 2A2

Fax: (416) 368-5984

E-mail:

<HRA@homefreeweb.com>

Contributions welcome!

(Contributions may be edited for space)

