

Transcription of ReThreading Madness Interview with David Oaks and Debra Nuñez re: MindFreedom

Intro slate with music

Today I'm speaking with David Oaks and his partner Deborah Nunez. David is a civil rights activist who was the co founder and former executive director of MindFreedom International based in Eugene Oregon. MindFreedom is an independently funded nonprofit that actively fights for the human rights of those with lived experience of mental health challenges. It is accredited by the United Nations as a nongovernmental organization, essentially an NGO with CRS status, which means they are consulted on matters important to mental health. As they say, "MindFreedom International is where democracy is finally getting hands on with the mental health system. They challenge abuse by the psychiatric and drug industry, support psychiatric survivors and mental health consumers and promote safe and humane and effective options in mental health." And they have been doing it since the Mad pride revolution started in the 1970s as they say on their website in a spirit of mutual cooperation, mind freedom leads a nonviolent revolution of freedom, equality, truth and human rights that unites people affected by the mental health system with movements for justice everywhere.

Up until 2012, Oaks was their Executive Director and then he fell from a ladder of fall which broke his neck and left him paralyzed. And I say this, not because it is important to the work he continues to do, but as a segue into understanding that David currently is unable to speak in the manner he once did. However, rather than suppress or silence his very powerful voice, we are interviewing him. His partner Deborah Nunez, will be a part of this interview and you may hear her every once in a while help make clear what he is saying. It is difficult at times to hear him clearly and it may be helpful while listening to close your eyes. However, we have also included a transcript of his interview on our website. And if you would like to listen to it while reading the transcript, you can do so at www.rethreadingmadness.ca. So that's [www.rethreadingmadness](http://www.rethreadingmadness.ca) (all one word) .ca If you want to search for that now we will take a quick break and be right back.

PSA not transcribed.

Segment 1

Bernadine

You're listening to rethreading madness on Vancouver coop radio CFR Oh 100.5 FM. I'm Bernadine Fox and today I get to speak with David Oaks and his partner, Debra Nuñez, about his work for all folks who are psychiatric survivors dealing with mental health challenges, but

also more importantly about his work with MindFreedom. And we'll get to what MindFreedom is in a minute. Welcome David and Debra. Thanks

So David can you tell us how you ended up in a psych ward? How did that happen? What happened? What landed you there?

David

I was a working class man from Chicago. And I was under a lot of stress and pressure as a scholarship student at Harvard. And I just broke under and I took too many substances, you know and got overwhelmed and I began entering an altered state. So called psychotic. But for me, I was kinda overwhelmed by my emotions, but it was very different. Don't you know? I thought the TV was talking about me personally.

Bernadine

Right.

David

So when Harvard authorities placed me in a psych facility in a way I did, you know, I needed help. But what I found was a real attack on my dignity and my self respect. As soon as I entered the ward, you know, they tried to drug me, or when I refused I was put in solitary confinement and held down on a mattress and forcibly drugged. So this was in the mid 1970s. As a teenager, I was – I needed support, understanding, peer counseling, and some respite but what I got was trauma.

Bernadine

So your trip to the psych ward was not helpful. It was traumatic by the sounds of it.

David

Yeah, yeah.

Bernadine

Every story I hear about people going to the psych ward, is traumatic and I think people think that you know, you're, you're told you know, if you're having trouble, you know, and you think you might hurt yourself or you think this, just go to the hospital, but I am waiting to hear a story of somebody going to the hospital and actually getting treatment in such a way that it was helpful. You said that it attacked your dignity. Is that partly that they put you in solitary confinement or were there other things that happened?

David

Well, the attitude was very authoritarian, controlling you know. Over the years, I met some lucky people who got help and support in an institution but even lucky ones support our human rights agenda. And generally, what I found is disempowerment and kind of an attitude of contempt, that never entered my inner self. And I have been adversely impacted on drugs, drugs, drugs. They are so horrible. And in fact many of the "major tranquilizer" drugs they offer are neuroleptic – now they are known as antipsychotics and are the same family of drugs. For example, Haldol. Now they are drugs like Abilify or Risperdal. They are frightening and they control my mind. I was held down and injected, it felt really degrading at my most vulnerable time. I called this my recruitment room because there was a steel mesh window and they left me alone and I pounded the mesh with my fist and said, "When I get out of here I am going to do some major damage to the system."

Bernadine

I love that. I'm glad that that's where you went with it because I think our world has benefited from your anger. So let me get this straight. Let me see if I have understood you. You were a teenager. You're in Harvard. You had a lot of pressure. You started using substances to deal with some of that stress. You kind of went into an altered state and instead of getting support, and help to come back to what wasn't an altered state, you ended up in the hospital in solitary confinement with a mattress on the floor and mesh on the windows you were unable to get out. And they were holding you down giving you how Haldol and Thorazine which is the equivalent of anti psychotics today. So so I don't know those things and they're both anti psychotics how those stops you from hallucinating. So did they stop you from hallucinating?

David

I found it to be really negative. I needed my mind..... I needed support, connection, community, people... and I felt really flattened out, destroyed really by drugging. And you know what helped me - back in the 70s there was a revolutionary group. I was very rebellious. So yes, I needed real help, compassionate help. What I got was degradation.

Bernadine

Well, I don't think you were treated like a human being I think you were treated like a body that needed to be warehoused and needed to be kept under control and quiet while they were warehousing you by the sounds of it. Did they give you support groups did a therapist talk to you did you...?

David

You know I was in McLean Hospital, Harvard's teaching hospital and often touted one of the best institutions in the world. When I met with the psychiatrist it was one of my worst moments because here is this bright Harvard psychiatrist a few feet from me telling me "You have a biochemical genetic imbalance. You will need these medicines for life". That was horrible. They didn't offer me choices. The support group was about taking our psych drugs. There was ... I think a counselor who was often helpful in this mess – the traumatic mess. Ah, you know strangely what helped me was Vietnam era psychiatry. Many of those locked up in McLean had been there for many months. But in the 70s they were trying to treat people more quickly. Because I know some people that ended up in McLean for months or years. all those old buildings connected by tunnels. Never really get free.

Bernadine

yeah, there is something really profound that happens when you are in the company of people who have experienced, even parts of your life and you get to share and hear and know and get it how normal you are for what you've gone through. Are you still taking psychiatric drugs?

David

No, I stopped when I got out of Harvard. In 1977, it was when I graduated and that was my last dose.

Bernadine

So were you forced to take it while you were at Harvard like finishing your school?

David

No. I was told I'd be kicked out. I would be expelled. One positive thing at Harvard, I connected up with this volunteer agency that was progressive and they connected me up with one of the early psychiatric survivor groups, Mental Patients Liberation Front. I was placed as an intern and that changed my life. I've been doing that work since - for 47 years. So they help place me as an organizer.

Bernadine

Right. Okay. We just need to take a little break, folks, but we're going to be right back with David and Debra talking about MindFreedom and because it's the 20th anniversary of your hunger strike. So you want to get right into that as soon as we're back.

PSA's not transcribed

Segment 2

Bernadine

You're listening to ReThreading Madness on Vancouver coop radio CFRO 100.5 FM. I'm Bernadine Fox and I'm chatting with David Oaks and his partner, Debra Nuñez. Welcome back both of you. So, David, you were a part of this community/organization, the Mental Liberation's Front. Did I get that right?

David

No. Patients.

Bernadine

Mental Patients Liberation Front.

David

Yeah, we connected up with several dozen other efforts using mail and phone.

Bernadine

Well, that's good. How did MindFreedom come out of that and did MindFreedom come before the hunger strike or which what is the - how did all that happen?

David

Yeah. What we psychiatric survivors found over the years by the '80s, that there was funding by the government for mental health consumer groups. And that's nice. But there's one thing that government did not fund which was activism

A bunch of psychiatric survivors. gathered together in late 1980s and formed MindFreedom International as a way to have an independent voice. Imagine the whole environmental movement is only funded by EPA and oil companies. That's what it is often, like, with disability organizing. Our people are so poor. So that's what we did, we started MindFreedom to be an independent beacon of activism.

Bernadine

Right. So MindFreedom was set up to be to do political activism to make changes happen on a political scale.

David

Right yeah.

Bernadine

So at what point did you do the hunger strike? It's a 20-year anniversary, so that would be in 2003?

David

It felt like a tsunami, avalanche of oppression landing on us, and so we organized a bunch of us a hunger strike. It took months to prepare cause there was a lot of strategy involved with the hunger strike.

Bernadine

Where did the hunger (ineligible) Oh, sorry.

David

Go ahead Bernadine

Bernadine

Where did the Hunger Strike take place? Was it in different places? Did you go to one central place or did people just do it in their homes or...?

David

We were mainly in LA. Mickey Weinberg was the main organizer. Our strategy was not just fighting the medical model. We were anti-oppression and years of ... and force. If someone used the medical model in their recovery process, fine. But what we said is if you are going to use the medical model to force us – where is the evidence? Show us the lab test, a brain scan, anything, any proof, any expert. – We had a panel of scientific advisors that worked closely with us and we actually engaged the American Psychiatric Association and went back and forth. And we got international media and we won! It was big. Yay! We got it in writing that they have no evidence of this theory of chemical imbalance.

Bernadine

Yeah, so let me just take folks back just a tad because... So not everybody may know this, that there was a sort of a switch somewhere in psychiatry where they kind of moved from well, not from I'll say they moved to this notion that there was a chemical imbalance and that caused you to be depressed or schizophrenic or all kinds of things right and then push was if you take this chemical, ie this pill, then it will correct your chemical imbalance and you will be fine. Is that correct?

David

Yes,

Bernadine

Yes. Okay. And what's become clear is that there doesn't seem to be any evidence it is clear that in some cases, it seems to work for people and I'm hearing you say that that's okay for them that that's working for them. And that's great. But you were saying that you guys wanted to see the evidence that there was this chemical imbalance that caused these mental health challenges and, and I think that that's reasonable. People don't really understand that a lot of psychiatry is based on ideas and theories and thoughts and a vote and not much of it has ummm has the backing of evidence. So what you were asking for it was a very real thing. And what you got was a statement that said that let me see if I can find it here quickly. They conceded that brain science has not advanced to the point where scientists or clinicians can point to readily discernible pathological lesions or genetic abnormalities that in and of themselves serve as reliable or predictive biomarkers of a given mental disorder or mental disorders as a group. And yeah, you won. That's ah...

David

And there was a Washington Post, LA Times, BBC, Washington Post and beyond. You know we got out the truth. It always felt wrong to oppress us. Even if we had a chemical imbalance, but they're lying. And many of the people know – public - have been misformed by the industry and it can kill you if you take the wrong drug for too long. It can cause brain damage.

Bernadine

And that's kind of you know, as I've learned more and more and more, it's really clear to me that brain damage seems to be the side effect of a lot of interventions from the mental health industry. So I mean, ECT seems to be the most obvious example of that in that the manufacturers of ECT have said that, that one of the side effects is brain damage. We don't live in a society that will even allow the Oh, who is it in the states that confirms medications are good down there? The FDA, right? Yes, even the FDA tried to do some studies on whether or not ECT was still valuable and a good you know, treatment and psychiatrists got in the way and said no, and now there is sort of an forever moratorium on any qualitative research on whether or not EC T is working.

David

Yeah, electroshock has kinda been in limbo. You know, but that shock human rights problems, are incredible, Bernadine. Forced shock against their expressed clear wishes, involuntarily court ordered, happens internationally, including in the US. And whenever we got that out to the public, we got an immense amount of support. I say almost everybody supports us on this whether red, blue, whatever, you know. I believe the one group to support forced shock is the APA: American Psychiatric Association.

Bernadine

Why do you think that I mean, I'm gonna get into this discussion of why why are they so reluctant to you know, to thoroughly look at what it is they're doing and how it is impacting on people. I live in Canada. You live in the United States and up here ECT is making a comeback, you know, and even I know a psychiatrist who had ECT done and and she's I said are you sure that's what you want to do? And she said, Oh, it's very different than before. And and as you know, it's not that harmful. It's done very differently. So it's okay. And she came out of it with no memory intact. Like she you know, I shouldn't say no memory, but her memory was very, very impaired. And even two or three years later, it was still very impaired and, and then she had a stroke, and she never survived the stroke. Ultimately, she never came back. So the other thing that I heard that was shocking is that lobotomies are coming back but they're calling it psychosurgery or some nice name. You know, so we're talking brain damage. We're talking about invasive treatments. And honestly, I think when you're putting drugs into somebody's brain and body, it's just as invasive as a lobotomy quite frankly, we need to take another break. Sorry, folks. We'll be right back.

PSA's not transcribed.

Segment 3

Bernadine

You're listening to rethreading madness on Vancouver called Radio CFR 100.5 FM. I'm speaking with David Oaks, co founder of MindFreedom and Debra Nuñez. So David, we were talking about different kinds of treatment and how how they actually cause brain damage and I was wondering whether or not you had more to add to that.

David

Yeah, the drugs I was given were in the family of drugs now called antipsychotics. And if I had stayed on those drugs, I would most certainly have brain damage. The major brain studies are that long term use of these drugs can actually shrink the brain, ... shrink the brain. Plus you have a high risk of twitching called Tardive dyskinesia. Yes you know really even before it was drugs, for centuries, we've been oppressed. And I have asked that same question: Why? Why? Why? over and over. And really is social control. We ask why are we allowing the climate crisis ... and inequality, Why aren't we fighting back? And it's because of social control. And I am not saying all crazy thoughts are good but the people who first think them are often called crazy. MLK often called for Creative Maladjustment

Bernadine

Right.

David

Right -and you were saying that some of these cause chemical lobotomies.

Right. These drugs can, in the long run, shrink Frontal lobes. These are higher level functions - use of the drugs actually damage the brain. They call these anti-psychotics... but really it is about the oppression. We need to connect with other marginalized voices: lgbt, bipoc, youth – we need to be side by side.

Bernadine

I agree. I don't understand why it's so important to oppress folks who have mental health challenges. I just know it happens all the time. It happens very easily. It happens without people even noticing it sometimes that it's like well, of course we don't want that person talking. You know, it's it's like our society doesn't get it but that what we are doing to an entire group of people. You fell from a ladder recently?

Bernadine

Yeah, yeah. About 10 years ago, I was trying to get our cat..... off a loft.

Debra

...Our cat was up in a loft and David had climbed a ladder. And ...since so he couldn't look up, he fell.

David

.... I broke my spine. I called Debra as the paralysis.... came up my body. I almost died there. Debra is a brave champion of disability. She is a force of nature.

Bernadine

Thank you Debra.

David

You're a hero.

Bernadine

That's true. So, how did - how did that change your life? I mean, it seems very obvious. It changed your life in big big ways. Right? Like you can't walk and you have a difficulty talking and I know that you have difficulty with your hand. But how did it change your life in terms of your activism did it or is it still the same?

David

Well, because my voice and hands don't work, I couldn't go back to work the same way I've helped MindFreedom. These past 10 years I have applied the values and principles I observed in our movement about empowerment, community, advocacy and support. All those value came to mean very very important tools. I bridge the physical disability world and the mental health world. But ah it's difficult to bridge because the psychiatric survivors reject the labels and everything. So when it comes to the disability movement many of us to connect with that. Many say, "I am not disabled". Many of the disability leaders do not know how diverse we are. Some people see us as disabled but others do not. We need unity. There is a lot of diversity.

Bernadine

Do you think the disability community has leaders that are also inculcated in this idea that mental health consumers are frightening and we can't trust them and they're unreliable or they're weird or crazy or mad. Mad is my personal favorite word but but don't you feel that I mean it's it's easy right now to ... we figured out wheelchairs, right now people in wheelchairs don't scare people anymore. But I think people are afraid of somebody who has something different happening in their brain that they may not understand. And so it's easy just to shove us aside and and not deal with us then deal with us and maybe have to deal with something that they don't understand

David

I think this disability movement needs more activism. We are potentially the biggest movement in the world, and ah we really need to encourage folks to organize. I work with folks with physical disabilities and mental health consumers and psychiatric survivors. And they all agree that empowerment and community building are crucial. But you have a lot of diversity.

Bernadine

Yes.

David

I think a lot of times we have trouble even naming ourselves. We need to tell the world that we exist as a social change movement. We call ourselves mental health consumers or psychiatric survivors so often we call ourselves: C/S. Many of us call ourselves 'people with lived experience' or peers.

Debra

... then that includes everyone.

Bernadine

Yes, that's true

David

Our people are mental health peers. I.... would say all of humanity deals with mental challenges.

Bernadine

Absolutely

David

All of us do 100% .

Bernadine

Well and then there's words like you know freak, mad crazy. You know insane. I had a conversation with JD Derbyshire who's a comedian up here about what word does she like, you know, you know, what does she call herself, you know, and she liked the word 'mad' and I think we all have words that we like and that that is part of the diversity, but it also that diversity is also a part of what stops us from being able maybe to move forward using the power of numbers.

David

I like Mad Pride. I encourage the use of hashtag '#madpride' more. And Canada has been one of the leaders, especially Toronto. So, I'd say I would encourage us to connect with other movements. The Disability Movement is huge. And many of them need us to teach about our C/S Movement.

Bernadine

Yeah.

David

The public is more understanding of disability in general Well, several people are disclosing that have been depressed or addicted or trauma survivors or on the neurodiversity spectrum. But I was labeled a diagnosed psychotic as a teenager. There are many of us ... in the thousands. However, you know, to say, "Hey I am a diagnosed psychotic," that is social suicide. So I like the idea of a Positive Crazyness. A new PC. Positive Crazyness.

Bernadine

Positive Crazyness – I think that is a good PC. Thank you so much for coming and chatting with me about this. We will have a transcript of this podcast for people to go and review. So thank you, David. Thank you, Debra. And I hope I get to chat with you again soon.

David

Thank you for your work.

Bernadine

I appreciate that. Thank you. Okay, folks, we'll be right back.

PSA not transcribed

Unknown

And that's our show. I wanted to take a moment before we conclude here to remind everyone that it is the 20th anniversary of the fast for freedom and mental health, which David talked about during this interview. This hunger strike included six psychiatric survivors who came to Pasadena California from around the USA. Their demand? That the mental health industry produce even one study proving the common industry claim that mental illness is a biologically-based disorder. It charged that the pharmaceutical industry and psychiatry are medicalizing an ever widening spectrum of human emotions and behavior for financial gain, and willingly deceiving the public while all too often humiliating and harming their clients, or as we call them in the therapy abuse field "their victims". The hunger strike demanded the proof to validate their scientific claims and after 12 days, what they got was a mea culpa in this statement, and I want to read it, what the APA forwarded was,

“It is unfortunate that in the face of this remarkable scientific and clinical program a small number of individuals and groups persist in questioning the reality and clinical legitimacy of disorders that affect the mind, brain and behavior.”

Now, I don't think that's what mine freedom was doing. And it does sound here like they're about to be dismissed, doesn't it? But then they went on to admit that in fact, MindFreedom was correct. There is no scientific evidence that the medications they were pushing were linked to actual biological markers or deficits. Their mea culpa continued with the Association also conceding

“that core brain science has not advanced to the point where scientist or clinicians can point to readily discernible pathological lesions or genetic abnormalities that in and of themselves serve as reliable or predictive biomarkers of a given mental disorder or mental disorders as a group. Mental disorders will likely be proven to represent disorders of intercellular communication or of disrupted neural circuitry.”

Big words, right? So let's unpack that a bit. “Likely to be proven” means they they're not proven yet and they're hoping that that's where it's going. And “intercellular communication” means how your brain cells talk to each other. And “neural circuitry” basically means the way your synapses relay information to your nerve cells, which impair function. I also find it interesting how quickly a professional organization will try and prove their higher position by using terms that will throw the average Joe off completely an unnecessary thing in this situation. As Oaks who participated in his hunger strike noted, they acknowledge that they did not have the biological evidence of mental illness and demanded that the APA move beyond their narrow reductionist and biological model that was not based on scientific facts.

I believe at this point, it's also true 20 years later, that the APA still has not been able to provide those scientific facts to back up their claim that mental health issues are based and rooted in chemical imbalances. MindFreedom fights for the mental health consumer. If you are one of the one in five or love someone who is one of the one in five who deal with mental health challenges on a daily basis you should know about their global work and reach and you can find out more about MindFreedom by visiting their website and that is easily found at MindFreedom (all one word) .org. So that's MindFreedom (all one word) .org.

ReThreading Madness is now aired on Vancouver called Radio CFRO 100.5 FM on Tuesdays at 5pm on CJUM in Winnipeg on Monday at 9am. And then on CKXU in Lethbridge on Wednesdays at 1pm You can also find us on the Mental Health Radio Network and wherever you download your podcasts. My thanks to David Oaks and Deborah Nunez for joining me today. Our music was by Shari Ulrich. And as always, my thanks goes out to you for joining us. You are the reason we are on the air. Stay safe out there

Extro with music