

'Voices' event to explore mental illness

By Jessica Reynolds Staff Writer

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'Two Patients' by David Byrd
Thomas Gorman

A free event Thursday night at SUNY Oneonta involving area advocates and artists will combine elements of theater, live music and dance to explore and challenge perceptions of mental illness, organizers said Wednesday.

“David Byrd: VOICES” — which will take place at 7 p.m. at the college's Morris Conference Center — will be an artistic exploration of the life and work of Sidney Center artist David Byrd, whose art was inspired by his 30 years as a night orderly in a psychiatric ward, according to Jessica Farrell, one of the event's organizers and a member of Otsego County's chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness.

Byrd, who died in 2013, was a recluse, and his time as an orderly inspired him to create hundreds of paintings, drawings and a 212-page book that offers "a rare glimpse into the human experience of mental illness," Farrell said Wednesday.

Thursday's performance will be a dramatic telling of Byrd's life, according to Farrell, who was a friend of Byrd's. Large screens will show some of Byrd's never-before-seen works, and photos of him will help tell the story of his life. "Actors" dressed in white will echo the presence of patients in a hospital, Farrell added.

"VOICES" will also feature an original "soundscape" by Andes musician Michael Suchorsky; choreography by dancer and performance artist Colleen Blacklock of Oneonta; and a solo in the finale by Oneonta Job Corps student Griem Tyteana.

Suchorsky said he will play percussion, and the rhythms will be "pretty abstract," which he said should "go well with the subject matter."

"The idea is for people to be more open and feel comfortable coming forward about mental illness," Suchorsky said. "It's a huge issue, and this is one little step forward, which is better than none at all."

Blacklock said Byrd's artwork inspires her because it "expresses so much." The movements she developed for the performance are simple but powerful, she said.

"The goal is to share David's work with the public because mental health is a very important issue and the area needs more services, which I think will be clear through the performance," Blacklock said.

Aside from supporting mental health awareness in the community, the presentation aims to help SUNY Oneonta students, who are establishing a student-run chapter of NAMI, connect with area peers and address issues of stigma that prevent some young people from talking about mental health concerns, Farrell said.

Afterward, there will be an open discussion about the performance, mental illness, mental health care in the community and ways to advocate for those in need. Tyteana's rendition of "Amazing Grace" during the finale will be an uplifting ending, Farrell added.

"David's work is a little stark and haunting," she said. "And we wanted to end on a hopeful, beautiful note."