

Please help me welcome artist and NOMY advocate Jessica Farrell NAMI Delaware president Rina Riba and New York Connects coordinator Drue Brenner. Good morning, ladies. Good morning. Good morning. Jess, I want to start with you, because I mentioned briefly earlier when we started the show that there was an important exhibit that opened last week in the Roxbury Arts Center. And I would like, if you would, to just kind of give us a brief – to just tell us about this a little bit about the exhibit of David Byrd and how this all came about and how it leads us into the conference that we're talking about.

Well, thank you for having us here today and devoting time to this important event. Well, the exhibits there at Roxbury is David Byrd voices paintings from Montrose VA Hospital. It's a pretty incredible show, to be honest. Very emotional, very interesting. David had his connection to this conference is he had mental illness in his family. His father was institutionalized when he was a boy and later committed suicide. His mother abandoned him and his sibling when he was 12.

Basically, he had a childhood with a lot of upheaval as a young man. He served in World War Two and then studied art on the GI Bill in New York City. At 32, he started work as a night orderly in the psychiatric ward at the VA hospital in Montrose in New York. This experience led to his defining body of art. He was painting the patients under his care. He retired in 1988 to Sydney Center. He built a home and started painting from memory, and as he liked to say, he was finally free in Sydney Center.

He led a reclusive life painting, writing and working in his home. And then in 2012, my colleague Jody Isaacson and I were working on a community arts program at a local school in Sydney Center, and it was kind of like fate. We met him as we were in the process of putting the show together as a fellow artist. I was amazed by David and his life and his art. I visited his home. He had hundreds of paintings, drawings.

His whole life was there. It was truly overwhelming. And the most captivating images for me in the paintings were the patients. His work is very honest, emotional. I have family members with mental illness and I truly had never seen anything like this. It was just quite emotional from there. Jody and I, after the Sydney Center show six months later, he had a show at the Grand Jury Gallery in Seattle, Washington. That was in April of 2013.

And David was 87 years old. It was an amazing show, amazing success. It was just the opportunity of a lifetime. And, you know, at 87, it was amazing that he made it for that. Unfortunately, a few weeks before the show, he was diagnosed with cancer. And David actually died two months after the opening of the show. And that was on May 30th, 2013. And, you know, David certainly altered my life and Jody's life.

And basically since meeting him in September 2012, you know, our life has been about David. We continue to support his legacy of his important work patients from the VA after and actually in November 2013, he had another exhibit of his work Jodie and I put together. You know, that was a very emotional time. We worked on that as he was. His health was declining, but unfortunately, he did not get to see that show. David was an advocate for the mentally ill, obviously through his 80s.

But he also wrote a book called Montrose VA Hospital, 1958 to 88. And it's a really important, beautiful, poetic historical account of mental health care. And just truthfully, everything kind of came together. My friendship with David, you know, his profound, amazing work, his writings, and then my own family experience with mental illness. And it was just. Kind of a natural progression of life events that led to this day, and I really feel that they would be would be very proud and he is certainly the inspiration for this conference.

Before we move into that next phase, I want to. It was it was quite remarkable. I I do need to mention last week, watching people walk around the room, taking his artwork and listening to some of the comments that stayed with me even more was after everyone left you and your. I don't think you even heard this yet. There were two people that came in after everyone left and they were like, oh, my God, I thought it was OK until, you know, they got they were they were busy all over the county and they got the times mixed up with different things that they were saying.

And I was actually putting things in my car and I said, I'm happy to. I said, I come on in, please take it in and it will be OK for this amount of time and you can come back with us and come on in. And so they came in and they just were in awe and taking in the the how the work, they they just couldn't get past that because this work spanned an enormous amount of the time of this man's life and how they they were so connected and how through his art, he was able to continue what he learned and saw and they couldn't get past how.

And it's just you mentioned that the pictures certainly are very honest and they're not colored in any way. They're very honest and depict the scenes that he saw. But he does do them in muted tones so that it's I think it helps someone come in and take it through a filter. So it's not you can see what was going on, but it also helps you take it in without being devastated or. Yes. Yes, I agree, Maggie. You know, the palette is very it's a very pale, kind of ethereal palette.

And you know very well in the sense that he was was he a calm man? Actually, on the surface, he was a very humble calm soul. But, you know, life experience has taken a toll on him and he had difficulty trusting people. It really showed, as you you know, he didn't let many

people into his life. But, you know, his life was certainly framed by his life experience. And I love that he used his art to his art, was his own form of therapy as well as it is now a form of therapy for those who see it and as well as and then just viewing art as a self.

I kind of want to move into a little bit of an area before we speak about the conference. Specifically, if you all could comment on how Art, because you all are different artists in your own right as well, Drue. You are a RINO, you are the director of NAMI Delaware. And I would love to hear from all of you on how art is used as a maybe as a therapeutic tool or how it seems to have evolved and moved with mental health awareness and recovery.

Well, I think that art, music, dance has always been a core part of the human experience when people try to reflect and express themselves and it speaks to all of us in many different ways. I was very excited to be invited in on the opportunity to help build this conference, in part because I think that that the role of artistic expression is often overlooked in our culture. And it is so important. I have worked most of my life with people who have struggled with a variety of issues, including mental illness.

And what I have found is that they need often to find a voice and a way to communicate and to reach out, as well as see in art something that speaks to saying, oh, you're not alone. There's there somebody else who's been through this. There's something else that's going on. And I think that's a convergence of the different things we're going to be doing at the conference is highlighted, enhanced and really brought to the fore through through the fact that it's so connected with particularly David Byrd's artistic expression of what his experience had been.

If you by the way, if you are just tuning in, I want to fill you in. That was that was Drue Brenner from the coordinator for New York Connects and with her here in the studio is Rina Riba, the NOMY president. And we also have Jessica Farrell, artist and NOMY advocate and also the coordinator, along with Jody Isaacson to putting together this conference that we're talking about. And before we go further into the conference, we're just talking about the importance of art.

And that was Drue, because I have the luxury of looking at a book and do not. So that was Drue Brenner just talking ... Reno with your experience and working as president of NAMI Delaware, which means Delaware County and New York through your outreach and through all of the different so many aspects. Could you just fill us in a little bit about what NAMI first before we go further? I think that would be good. NAMI, the National Alliance on Mental Illness was founded about thirty five years ago and is the country's largest grassroots mental health advocacy organization.

It provides support, education and advocacy for people with mental illness and their families through local affiliates like ours. And there were annual conferences of state and national level educational conferences as far as the arts. I'm just thinking of a couple of young people that I know who have found the use of art as an expression for I guess I don't know is the word. But, you know, I guess exploring how they're feeling with with mental illness. One of them gave a talk, the public talk a few months ago talking about how writing poetry and playing a variety of instruments really helped.

And some of the songs were read by other people. I didn't realize that they were his and they were powerfully moving. Was he there during the presentation? And he was amazed at the response from the audience. And also one of our members was a family member who has written songs. She'll be at the conference songs about the whole experience of living with family members and the love for them and the music as a way of just communicating the feelings about it.

So I think it's a wonderful tool. And we've had Ellen Stewart, our local our therapist has been on our radio station. She gave a presentation at one of press conferences a couple of years ago. I think it's vital and it's very vital. And I hope at the end of all of this, if we don't do anything, we encourage people to go past those stigmas that still just way down. Anything has to do with mental health. So with that, let's let's go.

Jess, Jessica is how you know you are with these these David Byrd exhibits going on and you feel lucky. Oh, how wonderful. To be able to come to his presence before and for him to also experience his own exhibits. That's terrific. How did this evolve now into a conference? This is this is a first for you. I Drue and Rena, I know you've been a part of many different types of conferences, but just you're taking a lead role on this and tell how this all came about.

Well, yeah, it almost feels like fate in a way. Basically, I've been working on this project with David through the community. And, you know, and then through my own personal experience, I became involved with the National Alliance on Mental Illness. And it's a wonderful organization that, you know, supports families and individuals, you know, who have mental illness, which is so many, because I think the statistics are one in four, which is incredible mental illness.

Could you just give a brief? It's got a range, I mean. Oh, yeah. So if you could just kind of go from one to ten being extreme. What? Because I think that's part of maybe some of the stigma busting is that, you know, everyone thinks that if you have mental illness, you are, I don't know, some kind of deranged killer coming after something crazy. And and I don't mean to be funny. There is.

But could you give us a range of what what encompasses mental illness?

Well, I'm certainly not an expert, but I you know, it can be just a whole host of different, I guess, disorders, you would say anywhere from anxiety, depression, you know, bipolar schizophrenia, if it encompasses. A wide range of different issues for people, but I think the thing, regardless of where you fall in that spectrum, I think the message that I've learned is that recovery is possible and that that's really the message that this conference I hope that's what we can spread and also reduce stigma, because personally, I, you know, have had a family history for a while with with this issue.

And I really haven't really delved into it. And NAMI has just been a wonderful support in making me realize things and understanding how how much hope there is. So how did all three of you get connected with this conference through Rena, Jess. because we've got we've got NAMI going on. We've got New York Connects, how did that how did you all come together and say, let's put on my world? Because I'm I say, let's put on a show.

So is it. Oh let's put on a conference out of this one. How do we get there. Anybody Jessica and I met through NAMI , and she had already started this plan, and I'm an instigator. Yeah, I like that. And I thought I'd take it. And than among the various organizations I belong to is the Delaware County Long Term Care Council, which is chaired by Drue. And I told her about it and went from there.

Yes. And I said, interestingly enough, I'm looking to fund another conference around mental health issues. Well, we found that we have some of our most productive meetings in parking lots, and that's where that connection to your connections and organization that's designed to assist people who have needs for long term care supports and services. I work closely with the Office of the Aging, but I'm also charged with looking at issues for people under 60 as well. And one of the things that the long term care council has done was identify way back down now a good number of years, the lack of sufficient mental health services and supports in Delaware County.

And to address that, we started a series of workshops around geriatric mental health issues. But it expanded indeed, the keynote speaker, who will be speaking on Saturday, June 31st. Jason Payton spoke at one of those conferences and Jessica calls herself an instigator. I call her an inspiration because know that I've been in the business a long time, but it takes passion and courage to push forward and a concern like mental illness, because just as you say, there is misunderstanding, there is fear, there is stigma.

And people have to begin to stand up and talk about what's really going on and present themselves as part of the community. It was interesting to me that someone who is an excellent volunteer for senior services called me up and asked to be registered for the conference and she said, well, we were on the phone. You know, it

sounds like it's going to be really interesting. And then she paused and she said, you know, I think it's in every family.

And I said, yes, yes. This is not just somebody someplace else. This is among us. And we need to be better educated. We need to reach out. So I was delighted to have the opportunity to find the money to underwrite the conference. Well, I would like if we could if we could all just hold on a minute, because I do want to talk about the panelists and just give a little bit more information on the conference so that if everyone could just hold on to your pants, as we say, oh, we're going to do I would like you to listen to a few messages and then and then stay with us, because we've got a lot more that Jessica found in a river, and you better have to tell us.

So hold on to your pants... And we're going to continue in just a moment with more on the mental health awareness and art and the conference, which is happening when ladies next Saturday, the 31st and right here we go, the 50s and 60s gave some wonderful rock and roll and some fine, jazzy, fizzy stuff, too. Hi, this is Bonnie Mitchell inviting you to bop along with me on these platters, The Crickets, The Temptations, the Elvis, The Beatles, the big names.

Janice, just to let you catch your breath, do some talk. Check your temperature. Be here for Bonnie's Bop to get you on weekends bopping and every Friday night, starting at six o'clock here on WIO, community radio ninety one point three FM. WIO is supported by the great team of professionals at Frank Lumia real estate plus members of our Otsego, Delaware and Ulster County Multiple Listing Service, accessible and realtor.com. Whether you're buying, selling or just in need of information for home land or business with offices in Margaretville and Delhi, eight four five five eight six four four eight six or six or seven seven four six six zero two nine or Frank will be a real estate dot com.

And you are indeed listening to Ragtime when the experts can take time to talk about the arts. And today, joining me here on Ragtime is artist and advocate Jessica Farrell, NAMI Delaware president of Rina Riba and New York, Connects coordinator, Drue Brenner. And we are all talking about a wonderful conference and again, an exhibit that you can now currently see. It's up through February to February 5th. I don't have that date in front of me.

So, Jessica, 17 17th, I believe Feb 15 . Do I have 13? I hope I have that date right. Well, you can. You can. This is of course, we're talking about Voices, which is an exhibit by David Byrd of his works and is currently in the Walt Mead Gallery in the Roxbury Art Center. And for more information about that one hour of his visit, that was a million thoughts, all in one trying to come out at the same time.

Frightening. OK. For more information on the David Byrd exhibit, six

or seven three to six seven nine 0 eight or Roxbury Arts.org. But we do know it's up for another four weeks. OK, so with that, we're going to continue the conversation and we're going to get into the conference itself, which is hope and healing is taking place at the Roxbury Arts Center next Saturday. So if you are attending, you will also see the exhibit because it's in the same building of David Byrd and.

I would love if you ladies would talk about who are our speakers and what kind of what does it encompass? Well, he's going to have basically three components are we going to have an introduction to the audience of the significance of David Byrd, his work, which both Jessica and Jody will be doing? And then we're going to have brief presentations on a panel of people who are going to be talking, many of them from NAMI , talking about individual recovery, talking about family support, talking about some of the programs that are out there to reach out to families who are dealing with mental illness.

We are then going to move in to lunch at a very big important always, always. And then after lunch, the keynote speaker, Jason, is going to do a presentation called The Art of Recovery. And this is a very powerful, inspirational presentation about his own history and his recovery. And I have, as I said, had him for one of the other conferences. It was an extraordinary event. I could see his presentation turning people's minds around and looking at mental illness an entirely different way.

It was one of his first presentations. He did a full standing ovation of at least five minutes is going to be knock out. And then we're giving an opportunity because this is billed as a conversation for people to get back in touch with. Different panels of different presenters will be introduced to ask questions, to have informal conversations, because it's going to be through this process of communication and starting a conversation that we will begin hopefully from this conference to begin to build a better way for our community to respond to the issues.

Excellent. So what I one thing that stands out to me, which I think is really important, is coming from a layperson who has run into many people who have discussed this question and has worked in social services before, not directly with mental illness, but in other areas is the where can I say people are lost. They don't know where to get help. So I was very happy to hear that you're going to have different services available. You're going to there'll be will there be handouts?

And how is this working? Yes, everybody who attends is going to get a basic information package with contact information on all the presenters so they can reach out and get some more information. We hope that people will also bring information brochures to the

conference so they can hand out to people. It's a way of making the connections between people. Absolutely. And it's for those of our listeners for that time, we have listeners that are as far as Alaska and a lot of down in the metropolitan area in Florida and a couple out there in Europe.

And so for many of you, if you are dealing with this this subject, what is what's your advice for someone who is not in downtown Delaware County and they don't know, but they're listening in and saying this is striking a note. How do I find out more if you have any thoughts on that? Well, the National Alliance on Mental Illness has a website, [www.NAMI.org](http://www.NAMI.org) ? OK, another resource may be the Mental Health Association of America, and they've changed.

So I think it's mental health. America, [MHAmerica.org](http://MHAmerica.org). There's also a state division [MHANYS.org](http://MHANYS.org). And why is that or another way they could use it for some reason if you're driving and they could just simply type in mental health, health, two different things come up or what are some key words that would help bring up just just in case there like that? It was something happening in the cars, mental health advocates. All right. I would say.

But in other words, there's many ways that people can get help and they should not be afraid or shy to do so. It's it's always confidential. And we have there are resources out there. Yes. But it often takes a fair amount of courage. Yes. That's a good first step is so difficult. But clearly, there's a real hunger out there to learn more, to connect more, because we're talking about this wonderful conference. I hope nobody out there is getting overexcited about.

Oh, I'd like to go because we're completely sold out, at this point, the response has said the most important thing, right? We. On something that people want and people need, right, and we hope that this will continue, this will not be the last. Oh, I don't think it will be. And because it is an important issue and it's not just in Delaware County. So wanted to kind of open that up for people who are listening, who are outside of Delaware County just so that they could have an idea of what they can do.

And it's it's so true, as in its courage, courage, really, to make that first step. And there are people there to hold your hand and tell you you are fine, you are absolutely fine, and you're not alone, you know. So, again, the Hope and Healing conference is next Saturday, January 31st, Roxbury Arts Center, downtown Roxbury, New York. For more information, you can look into it and you can certainly look up more information by going to it on the [NAMI.org](http://NAMI.org).

Also, the state is the central New York state [NAMINYS.org](http://NAMINYS.org) . is OK, Doug. All right. Both of those will have lots of information and links to other sources. And if, of course, there's the Roxbury Art group

six 0 seven, three to six seven nine zero eight. I know the staff there will be very happy to lead you in the right direction if you weren't able to write down everything and and get you going.

But it's very important and. You know, also as an artist, always more from the performing arts side there with, you know, there is a little bit of that being open to other things that helped create your art, which also sometimes leads you down a path of. Anxiety, insecurity, you know, so it goes hand-in-hand on both sides of the fence, whether it as a tool for recovery or some kind of way to express oneself as well as.

Well, everything so I could go on for days about art, but I think what it does is it helps us understand our own selves better. Yes, thank you very well. But before we close this segment, just is there anything that you wanted to add to this? Well, I'm just I feel, you know, very, very pleased that this event is happening on a personal level. I think for the greater community, certainly I you know, I'm very appreciative of all the people who have come together to make this happen, not me.

I see going into Delaware County, Rina Riba, Drue Brenner, New York Connects Roxbury arts group, of course, where the great support with this event, you know, very excited about it. I know that I have found hope and healing, you know, through my own personal journey. And I feel that the opportunity is there for so many other people to experience that and to really realize they are not alone. And, you know, there are people that can really move you forward if you're struggling in any way.

And and I think this event will certainly be very helpful and very healing. Excellent. Drue, is there to run or do you have any final thoughts on on what we could offer for this this topic? Well, I think Jessica really wrapped it up well, but I will say I have a secret hope that this will be the start of a different way in which the entire community, Converse's supports, educates and probes the boundaries of what we need to learn and understand to respond to mental illness in a better way.

That's nice. Yes, I'm with you. My hand is going up. Rina Riba, I'd like to get back a little bit to when we were talking about the issue of stigma. I've heard it described as discrimination after several years of working as in a program for advocacy for people with any disability of any age. One of the basic things that I was taught and that became a mantra was a person with a disability is a person with a disability.

They're not defined by disability. And some disabilities are invisible, can be mental illness. It can be being hard of hearing or condition. When we look at the person first and we see the strengths

focusing on the strengths and helping to build on those and helping them to work through with their disability issues. So just remember that. Thank you, sir. That was a very good reminder of all of us, how we might also be better people. So I thank you.

I thank you all very, very much for joining me on Ragtime today. This has been a really, I think, insightful and wonderful conversation that I hope is also the first of many. I certainly I think that, you know, we can I think I see some other future conversations that we will be sharing, and I think that would be terrific. Rena, you are always what will is my right hand man, as I like to say.

But Jessica, terrific. I commend you for all the work you've done. I know this is actually kind of new to you, and I think you've done an amazing job. Thank you very much. For those of you listening who are in the area and are able to get to the gallery, even if you are not going to or cannot attend the conference, by all means, do drop by throughout the month come visit and take in David Byrd's exhibit.

And I think you'll be very happy you did. I want to thank very much NAMI advocate Jessica Farrell, NAMI, Delaware President Rina Riba and New York Connects coordinator Drue Brenner for joining me on a very insightful and important, I think right time. Thank you very much, ladies. Thank you for having us. Thank you so much, Maggie. Thank you. We'll see you soon.