

Editors and News directors, following is a book review. I am authorizing its use for no charge. The subject of the book has an interest to any individual connected with mental health care, either as a patient or provider.

Dorrance Collins. 11/16/20

One Person's Journey to become a mental health advocate

“Going Crazy in Alaska: A History of Alaska’s Treatment of Psychiatric Patients.”
By Faith J. Myers Available for pre-order from Amazon Print-on-Demand, Barnes and Noble and Bookbaby.com \$14.95 and Kindle on-line e books.

In-state mental health care does not have a long history in Alaska. In 1957, Congress provided \$6,500,000 to put in place “an integrated mental health program” that had to cover 663,300 square miles. The individuals best able to judge Alaska’s success or failures are the former psychiatric patients. The book, “Going Crazy in Alaska,” should be of interest to any individual connected with mental health care, either as a patient or a provider.

In 1999, Faith J. Myers was a 48-year-old grandmother with an Associate’s Degree in Early Childhood Education and a good job. As Myers states in her book, “Everything seemed fine. I did not smoke cigarettes, rarely drank alcohol, and I did not do illegal drugs. It was the luck of the draw I developed a severe mental illness.”

There are easier and more pleasant ways to gather material for a book than the route Myers ended up taking. On seven occasions Myers was locked in psychiatric facilities in three states, Nevada, Washington and Alaska; four times in a psychiatric evaluation unit and six times escorted to those facilities by the police in handcuffs. Myers states in her book, “It was the indifference of my treatment and mistreatment that led me to become a mental health advocate.”

In the months Myers spent locked in psychiatric facilities, she came in contact with hundreds of psychiatric patients. Some are remembered quite fondly in the book and others with a touch of sadness. In the best of times being locked in a psychiatric institution is humiliating. Some walk away from the experience in one piece, others don’t. Myers writes, “The state (Alaska) could be doing a lot more to help psychiatric patients walk away from the experience in one piece.”

From 2003 to 2006, Myers became the plaintiff in *Myers v. Alaska Psychiatric Institute*. Law professor Michael Perlin, the author of the pre-eminent law treatise on Mental Health Disability Law, wrote:

[T]he Alaska Supreme Court's...decision in *Myers v. Alaska Psychiatric Institute*...is the most important state Supreme Court decision on this topic in many years, perhaps the most important since *Rivers v. Katz*, some 20 years ago.

The book "Going crazy in Alaska" describes the vulnerability of psychiatric patients: "For a psychiatric patient there are a lot of risks associated with being locked in a acute care psychiatric facility or unit. Over 40% of the patients will experience trauma that may cause or exacerbate Post Traumatic Stress Disorder." That is Myer's estimation based on her personal experience. Myers points out that Alaska has not conducted studies on the rate of institutional trauma in psychiatric facilities.

Individuals and organizations added their voice to "Going Crazy in Alaska": the Department of Health and Social Services added a history of the Alaska Psychiatric Institute; the Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority, the Law Project for Psychiatric Rights (PsychRights), the Alaska Mental Health Board, the National Alliance on Mental Illness, the Disability Law Center all contributed information concerning their organizations. Aron Wolf, MD, writes about alternative psychiatric care that could prove to have a better patient recovery outcome.

In the 1975 movie, *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, actress Louise Fletcher's Oscar-winning performance convinced the movie-going public that there can be a dark side to locked psychiatric hospitals.

With a little less drama, Myers convinces the readers that Alaska and by extension other states, could be doing a lot more to help disabled psychiatric patients locked in institutions recover. For that the book is worth the price.

Dorrance Collins, 3240 Penland Pkwy, Sp. 35. Anchorage, AK. 99508
907-929-0532

In the 1980's, Dorrance Collins was the co-publisher of "The Guide to Dutch Harbor—Unalaska," "The Aleutian Times," "The Kodiak Fisherman," and "The Marine Highway News and the Railroad News."