



**Jennifer Brown: 2003 Welcome Back Award Honoree
in the Destigmatization Category**

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Jennifer Brown
Director, Training and Communications
On Our Own of Maryland, Inc.

Running into stigma within the mental health community is counterintuitive. But that is the fuel behind the Anti-Stigma Project run by On Our Own of Maryland, Inc., a statewide mental health consumer education and advocacy organization.

“If people feel they will be treated badly and stigmatized by the system, they’ll stop seeking care,” explained Jennifer Brown. Helping people open up to the possibility they stigmatize is not easy, but it is essential, Ms. Brown believes, to effecting change.

The Project created a series of workshops and materials to help consumers, families, hospital employees, mental health professionals and others identify the ways that consumers can be stigmatized and their mental health care can be diminished. “From a consumer’s perspective,” she explained, “feeling like they’re not being heard, that they are not viewed as intelligent enough to partner in their own care, and then encountering roadblocks while navigating the health care system – these factors all impact overall health outcomes.”

This work is an outgrowth of an initial 18-month Task Force effort – a collaboration between On Our Own of Maryland and the Maryland Mental Hygiene Administration – that started in 1993. Panelists met every month to tackle the issue of stigma and, according to Ms. Brown, the only thing they could agree on was to meet again each month.

The protracted talks resulted in the Anti-Stigma Project. That's where Ms. Brown entered the picture. The challenge of funneling the Task Force learnings into a dynamic, fluid and memorable instructional tool seemed tailor-made for this professional trainer whose background is in performing arts, broadcast journalism and video production.

The workshop series focuses on defining stigma, understanding how it is perpetuated, what are its effects, and then identifying changes that can reduce it. Along with her co-facilitators, Ms. Brown has conducted hundreds of workshops for thousands of participants in Maryland, across the country and internationally. Additionally, she produced the video, "Stigma: in Our Work, in Our Lives."

The Anti-Stigma Project has also created original programming for the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, including the coordination of the first National Mental Health Symposium to Address Discrimination and Stigma.

According to Ms. Brown, stigma has for too long been seen as a "soft" issue, relegated to the "back burner," in light of seemingly more pressing concerns. But reducing stigma can impact the way mental health programs are funded, designed, implemented and received – or whether they're received at all.

"As someone who has struggled not only with depression, but with the intensely damaging effects of stigma, it's important to me to be part of creating a system that is more respectful, responsive and effective," she said. "I want things to be better for the next person."

Ms. Brown donated her \$5,000 Welcome Back Award to On Our Own of Maryland.