

Community Expert Alex Verkade speaks with Project Researcher Christie Wall:

Christie: How did you wind up getting involved in the History and Practice project?

Alex: I got involved 'cause Megan asked me to. [laughs] Megan and I – see, I was part of the MPA movie. And Megan – she kind of – she liked what she saw of John and I in the movie. And she then asked me if I wanted to be part of this project. And they took – my idea for her idea of the thing was that we do a Unity video.

I don't know what in me inspired Megan to ask me to be part of this project. She said it was 'cause I was pretty good with words. [laughs]

I came to the first meeting.

Christie: What made you want to say yes?

Alex: Curiosity. Money. [laughs] And I also liked the idea of working on something with Megan. I'm quite fond of Megan and you and Kelsey and the rest of the whole team. And then, I figure, what the heck, I'll just go there. And all of a sudden I noticed there were all these other interesting people there, with their projects.

Christie: What do you hope will come out of having participated in this project, and made that documentary?

Alex: Hopefully, students will see there is another way of doing things. That, yes, you can have consumer-run organizations – that mental health consumers *can* contribute to bettering their own situation. I hope that comes out of it. And that consumers, with help, can look after themselves. They can run their own housing programs. With some help. It's not perfect. It's the model I'm trying to peddle.

Christie: Tell me more about coming into the project ...

Alex: Yeah. I was really impressed with some of the other members of the project. The projects they were doing. That's what kept me coming.

Because I've spent so much time, recently in my volunteer work – again, with people who are so – non-interesting. Who have the “Do it for me. Do it for me. Do it for me. You haven't done enough for me” attitude. And here I get into a place where everybody's, “I want to do this! I want to do this!” You know? “Help me do this! Help

me do this!" I think that's why.

I think we're interested in showing – well one of the things we're interested in showing is that consumers *can* contribute in bettering their own situation.

Christie: Is that the spirit of consumer/survivors getting together to ...

Alex: To accomplish something. And the other thing I liked was the fact that you didn't – the guys in charge didn't try to force their ideas on us. It was interesting – the brainstorming, and it was real facilitation. Allowing things to happen. Helping things to happen. But not controlling what was happening.

And I think it's great, how many young people we had. They haven't had a chance to be jaded. Also, their experiences are not as atrocious as some of ours. I mean, much as the mental health system sucks right now, it sucked even worse in the mid-1970s.

Christie: So, besides what you already said about the challenges of the movie and the hours and hours that you spent fiddling with it – do you feel like – were there other challenges to participating in the project? Either making the movie, or working with academic researchers, from universities?

Alex: No, not really. I think I came into it with the idea that – I don't know. I just figured, what the hell, they put on their jeans like I do, one leg at a time. Sure, I was a bit in awe of Megan and Lanny. I'm still in awe of them. But they're very kind. They never lorded their intellectual superiority over me. After all, Megan has a doctorate in history. And Lanny's got some degrees, I'm quite sure.

Christie: Were there other things about the project that you felt were done well, or that helped you participate?

Alex: I think what was done well is that everybody got a chance to put in their two bits' worth. And I think everybody was respected. It was done in a respectful fashion. I didn't see any arguing. Everybody was heard, politely. I think that helped me, to a large extent. It's also helped me be a little more receptive to other people's ideas, at Unity Housing.

So, it kind of helped me understand that there's another way of doing things. I'm still working on that. Anger issues. Because there are difficult people in Unity Housing. It's helped me learn to try to deal with them.

The biggest thing this project did for me – it gave me a sense of self-worth, through participating in something. 'Cause for so long, I've just been doing the technical things at Unity Housing. Fixing the computers, doing the newsletter. So this was going back to listening to people's ideas.

Christie: That's great! Is there anything more that you think we should know, in the project, about your experience?

Alex: All I can say is that I was honoured to be part of it.

Christie: We were honoured to have you be part of it. Your video is fantastic.