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## SCHIZOPHRENIA: A SIBLING'S PERSPECTIVE

— OR “A LOT OF PEOPLE SAY YOU’VE  
BEEN ACTING STRANGELY LATELY, BUT  
I STUCK UP FOR YOU... I TOLD THEM  
YOU WEREN’T ACTING.”

*Wendy Dixon, Education Chair,  
Schizophrenia Society of Saskatchewan*

I saw this sentence on a card in a local drug store. I had been browsing for a birthday card for the twins, Calvin and Colleen. The card would have been perfect for my brother, Calvin. He became ill with schizophrenia when he was 20 years old — some 15 years ago. Through all of this, he has kept his sense of humour. Unfortunately, when I spotted this card, his illness had flared up and his sense of humour was at an all time low. I did mention it to Colleen and we had a good chuckle. Our sense of humour and affinity for the bizarre has proved to be our strength through thick and thin.

### Onset

I remember vividly the early days of my brother’s illness. Calvin was living

with my oldest sister Georgina in Calgary and was on scholarship. Georgina started calling Colleen. She was very upset at Calvin’s strange behaviour. She didn’t know what to do and thought he might be on drugs.

Colleen and I both said “not possible”. Calvin was the prodigal son, the “Golden Boy” as we siblings used to call him. He was always kind and earned the nickname “Smiley”. As Calvin once put it, “Things were going great for me, and then...”

### Diagnosis

Within six months, my brother was diagnosed as having schizophrenia.

The first few years were chaotic. At one point, Calvin, Colleen and I were all living at home. Colleen and I would joke about who would sleep with one eye open to keep guard. At times, Calvin was totally out of touch with reality. We had no idea what might be going on in his brain. Needless to say, none of us got much sleep.

My brother became chronically ill. Schizophrenia had taken away many aspects of his personality. Fortunately, he was able to hold onto two very important things: his concern for other people and his  
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## Sticks & Stones

Peter MacGibbon

Remember that old children's saying, "Sticks & stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me!". Only true in physical terms.

### Why did we change our name?

In recent times, the realization has grown that the labelling process *does* inflict serious injury on many people. Individual personalities become lost in the groupings so created. This is no less true for schizophrenia than for other forms of disability. Indeed, given the stigma which continues to overhang this illness, its impact may be worse. Among a number of reasons for the change in our association name approved a couple of years ago at the Annual General Meeting, this one is fundamental.

Another factor considered was a lack of public understanding of what the old name meant. Some thought our members were people who visited patients in psychiatric hospitals. Others wondered if we were not part of the Quaker movement. Most favoured the change and thought that the new name would more clearly define what our organization is all about.

### Background to our Original Name

At the start, the use of the word "Friend" in our name was an integral part of our Founding President, Bill Jefferies' concept for the new association. Look back more than a dozen years and remember how things were. Before the modern advances in medication and psychotherapy, those seriously afflicted with schizophrenia could look forward to a future which was grim at best. Apart from family members, they had few friends, if any.

Bill saw the word "Friend" as appropriate to the new organization's circumstances. He also saw the term "Schizophrenics" as vital to secure public attention to this form of mental illness.

Deinstitutionalization in the '60s and '70s meant severe curtailment of social life for most family members thrust into the role, as many were, of the primary caregiver for an ill relative. For them, the word "Friend" came to symbolize the spirit of camaraderie which developed amongst them, as well.

### Progress and Time to Look Ahead

There is still a long way to go, but conditions have improved. The general public does know more about schizophrenia. Medications and their management are better. Support programmes based on tested psychosocial rehabilitation approaches are now being introduced into the community.

In its own way, our new name, the *Schizophrenia Society of Canada*, symbolizes the growing maturity of our association. Inward preoccupations have become less important. We too, seek to move ahead with the times and improve the effectiveness of our public awareness, advocacy and other activities designed to help families, their loved ones and other affected by schizophrenia. ■

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sense of humour.

One time, Cal was sitting around with some friends with schizophrenia. He had a good laugh because his friend Al thought the tombstones were talking to him and it seemed perfectly logical at the time. I quickly pointed out to Cal that it wasn't long ago when the TV was giving him secret decoded messages. We all had a good chuckle as I recounted that psychotic adventure.

## The Struggle

My brother and I have been through many psychotic adventures together, all of them nightmares. Strangely, it wasn't the symptoms of schizophrenia that caused the nightmares. It was the fact that we never received any assistance in accessing proper health care. All we would every get were doors slamming in our faces. I would want to go out into the middle of the street and just scream.

My family and I have been at war with schizophrenia for 15 long years. The scars are many. We're war torn veterans and we no longer take much nonsense from anyone. We know my brother's illness inside out and backwards. There have been many days of total darkness and despair, but, no matter how painful or difficult the experience, in retrospect we can always find something humorous about it.

## My Dream

I have always admired and respected my brother, Calvin. Whenever I get to complaining too much, I remember that as long as Cal finds the strength to fight, then I must find the strength to do my part also. Some day, he will be healthy enough for me to give him that birthday card and we'll have a good chuckle together. ■