

Healing notes from someone who's been there and back

In a way, Diedrich Weiss will always feel at home at Fairview Southdale Hospital. And, for the last three years or so, he's filled that home with music.

Diedrich was born at Fairview Southdale Hospital 40 years ago. However, his next experience here was not as joyous; at 19, after experiencing suicidal thoughts and other signs of depression, he admitted himself into the hospital's mental health unit.

Today, Diedrich is still a regular on the mental health unit, but not as a patient—as a performer. Once a week, he plays guitar songs he's written about his life and experiences on the mental health unit.

He says his struggles with mental health issues help him connect with patients on a deeper level than others might.

"The first thing I say is, 'I was once a patient here; I have bipolar disorder; I write my own songs about my experience,' and people change at that moment. I'm one of them, not just some guy with a guitar. I'm not necessarily just for entertainment purposes, but to confirm, compassionately, their experience."

Helping others, helping himself
Volunteer coordinator **Pamela Mills** says Diedrich's story makes a big difference to patients on the unit.

"It gives them hope. They feel they're in a really bad spot, and here's



Diedrich Weiss

somebody who has sat in the same chair, been in a similar types of situation, and he's having a healthy life," she says. "That's one of the most valuable impacts he makes on patients. When there's someone who has been in your shoes and walked your walk, there's an immediate bonding."

Diedrich believes the volunteer hours are not only beneficial for the audience, but therapeutic for him, too.

"I knew that giving to others was a direct way to give to myself," says Diedrich. "By going in and seeing where I once was, it reinforces that I need to be vigilant about self-care."

'Public Songs for Private Use'

Diedrich's brother gave him a guitar more than 20 years ago while he was a patient on the unit, and he started writing songs four years later.

"The marriage of music and healing was formed, in a way, at that moment," he says. "This is just actualizing it, 20 years later."

Diedrich recently released his first CD, a set of tunes about his mental health journey appropriately titled, "Public Songs for Private Use." He hopes his honesty will open conversation about mental health. To that end, he is forming Diedrich Weiss Advocacy, through which he can offer performances and group talks to schools, hospitals and others.

Playing is his passion

Diedrich has appeared on Minnesota Public Radio and in the *Star Tribune*, among other places, to promote his CD and talk about his hospital experience. He says the promotional gigs are great, but he never feels more energized than when he sings here.

"I leave with such a full spirit. I feel purposeful, meaningful about my life. It's a strange thing, to take something so painful and turn it into something that's my life's passion."