



Clifford Beers:

The role a peer played in his recovery

by *Larry Fricks*

From experiencing psychiatric hospital restraints to founding the nation's oldest mental health advocacy organization - Mental Health America – Clifford Beers credited a peer for catalyzing his recovery.

In 1900, Beers, a Yale graduate and Wall Street clerk, attempted suicide, resulting in multiple hospitalizations, some that included forced treatment, physical beatings and long stints restrained in a straitjacket.

In 1908, following his recovery, Beers wrote a best-selling autobiography titled *A Mind That Found Itself*, documenting the inhumane treatment he and others endured that helped launch national reform. That year, Beers also founded the Connecticut Society for Mental Hygiene, and in 1909 the National Committee for Mental Hygiene that evolved into what is now known as Mental Health America.

Chronicled in his book, but a little known fact, is the key role a peer contributed to Beers' recovery. His peer was a fellow trusted patient that he bonded with in the hospital.

Attempting suicide was once considered illegal and Beers grew convinced that, when he was well enough, he would be prosecuted. He believed a detective imitating his brother George was visiting to get incriminating evidence. With the support of his peer, who had rights to visit town unsupervised, Beers wrote a letter that his peer mailed for him. Beers requested George bring the letter as a "passport" on his next visit verifying he was his brother. George successfully delivered the "passport," breaking through Beers' delusion and paranoia on the road to his recovery.

"The very instant I caught the sight of my letter in the hands of my brother, all was changed," wrote Beers. "The thousands of false impressions recorded during the 798 days of my depression seemed at once to correct themselves. Untruth became Truth. A large part of what was once my old world was again mine. To me, at least, my mind seemed to have found itself, for the gigantic web of false beliefs in which it had been all but hopelessly enmeshed I now immediately recognized as a snare of delusions." (Beers, 1908, p 85)

In 1930, Beers organized the International Congress for Mental Hygiene in Washington, D.C., attended by representatives from 53 countries.

Overwhelmed and depressed from constant fundraising and increasing bad health, in 1939, Beers voluntarily admitted himself to Butler Hospital in Providence, Rhode Island where he died four years later.

Yet Beers' significant contributions to the mental health community live on, thanks in part to the help of his peer.