

Medicine

The Souls That Drugs Saved

By JAMES WILLWERTH/LOS ANGELES

Monday, Oct. 10, 1994



Anyone who believes that drugs can't help the mentally ill should listen to Dr. Murray Frances. The 44-year-old physician recovered from 20 years of severe schizophrenia after taking the drug Clozapine. As Frances explains in *Schizophrenia: Voices of an Illness*, a remarkable documentary that will air on National Public Radio stations this week, even her hallucinatory inner voices somehow understood that medicine was their enemy. "You're not going to take that!" they screamed years earlier when doctors urged her to take the medication Haldol. "Do you want us to go away?" Frightened, Frances resisted that drug and others; she remained ill for another 17 years.

Psychiatric patients are generally insulted by contentions that their trouble was brought on by bad parenting, childhood trauma or weak character -- that they don't actually have a disease. While experts agree that family problems and other external factors can exacerbate mental illness, most have long ago concluded that the underlying causes are often biological and genetic. None of the recovered patients in the NPR documentary blame family woes. In fact, the illness caught many without warning. "I was looking up at the sky, and suddenly it cracked like a mirror, in a thousand pieces," recalls Laura Young, 31. "I don't know why I didn't realize it was an incredibly strong signal that something was wrong with my mind."

The schizophrenia program is the second documentary in a series on mental illness developed by **Bill Lichtenstein**, a former producer for the ABC-TV show *20/20*. His choice of subject matter had personal meaning: he came down with manic-depressive disease in 1986 and spent four years "struggling with the illness to get it under control medically." After getting better -- Lichtenstein is on the drug Tegretol -- he founded Lichtenstein Creative Media in New York City. Fittingly, his first project was a 1992 *Voices* program for NPR on manic depression. It was narrated by Patty Duke, who also suffered from the disease. Jason Robards offered to narrate the current schizophrenia program, volunteering that his first wife had been institutionalized for that illness.

The series offers a unique window on the interplay of sophisticated new medicines and patients' agonizing struggles to recover. Though sufferers appear withdrawn and disoriented, they are often painfully aware of themselves. "The person with schizophrenia has literally no emotional strength," explains Brandon Fitch, 21, a recovered patient who adds happily that medication has "liberated me from quite a few of my symptoms." Psychiatrist Wayne Fenton, who treated Murray Frances, laments that people who see a schizophrenic behaving strangely often assume that the patient "is someone who doesn't have feelings, who doesn't have a memory, who doesn't experience pain." Pioneering researcher Dr. John Kane points out that new drugs have helped patients whose families and doctors "had kind of given up."

Lichtenstein's work and own experience have made him a staunch defender of drug therapy. "Mental illness is not something you can take or leave," he concludes. "Medication was at the heart of my treatment." Without such help, many people with mental diseases try suicide, according to the documentary. "I don't know anyone," says recovered schizophrenia patient Cathy Roemke, 41, "who hasn't felt like it." The attempts often occur, therapists say, after patients decide they no longer need their "meds."