

A Tribute to Kevin Jackson

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When I first met Kevin in 2003 while teaching Mad People's History at Ryerson University's School of Disability Studies, he was quite shy. A few years later, when we met again in the mad community, he was less shy but still a quietly spoken person. This calming demeanour is perhaps my favourite memory of Kevin. Even in the midst of turmoil in a given situation, there was Kevin, making his points known while keeping his cool. But of course, as with anyone, there was more to Kevin's personality than this. He struggled with self-doubt, wondering if he had much to contribute as an academic, while always quick to acknowledge the abilities of others. He was also compassionate and considerate on a personal level; Kevin's warm words of support when family members died meant an immense amount to me.

Kevin's generosity as an activist, as an academic and as a friend, along with his genuine humbleness, endeared him to many people in the mad and disability communities. And he certainly had a great deal to contribute. His 2016 Major Research Paper in York University's Critical Disability Studies MA program entitled, "Victorian Madness in Ontario: A Mad People's History of the Mimico Branch Asylum, 1882-1908", is a model of how to research and write on a topic for which there is little documentation - in this case, no patient files which Kevin had originally wanted to use for his project. Instead, he investigated this topic through other primary sources on the asylum while providing a critical perspective on how, even if patient files no longer exist, the people who lived and died at places like this institution can still be remembered in meaningful ways.

Kevin knew this area quite well as he lived in south Etobicoke, not far from where the Mimico Asylum once operated; he was also an active supporter of efforts to remember people buried in the old asylum graveyard, now known as the Lakeshore Psychiatric Hospital Cemetery (1890-1979). During one of the years when I led history tours for Doors Open of the 19th century patient built walls on the grounds of the former Toronto Asylum, Kevin was there for two days directing people to when and where the next tour would begin. On these and other occasions he helped out, as well as organized, community events in the mad and disability communities.

Related to this work, Kevin was an active member of the Psychiatric Survivor Archives of Toronto (PSAT) which is where we came to know one another quite well. Kevin's work in the archives included emphasizing the need to collect material on racialized mad people and addressing prejudices in the mad community. He noted that the archives' collection was about white psychiatric survivors and was thus not representative of the wider community. This reflected Kevin's practice of wanting to do

something about injustices that persist within and without activist groups, whether it be historical silences or oppressive behaviour. He sought to change some of these practices for the better, such as with his central role in advocating for an anti-discrimination policy in the archives. When, in 2013, a long time member of PSAT, in the midst of a personal email attack on myself also wrote racist and ableist attacks against those nearest and dearest to me, Kevin understood that being mad does not excuse such behaviour. His understanding underlines Kevin's basic decency and integrity, in which he prioritized empathizing with people targeted by prejudice rather than with the perpetrator.

Kevin's ideas about how to continue this work of challenging injustices among and towards disabled people was going to be a part of his PhD work. The last few times we met he spoke of having been in a religious cult as a child, from which he broke away, and how he wanted to explore this further as it related to madness. It is a huge loss that he will not be able to do so. Thankfully, we do have some of Kevin's published contributions which are listed at the end of this tribute which deserve to be read far and wide.

The last time Kevin and I met was in my office at York University on May 2, 2019 when we talked about plans for his doctoral studies. He was cheerful and looking forward to life with his fiancé, Melissa Graham.

It was an honour to have known and worked with Kevin Jackson. A few months before Kevin died, he described himself in an email to me as a "semi-old mad activist". Now he is an activist for the ages.

KEVIN'S PUBLISHED SCHOLARLY WORK

Kevin Jackson, "A Textual Analysis of Newspapers, Madness and the Lakeshore Psychiatric Hospital," *Critical Disability Discourses* 8 (2017): 98-126.
<https://cdd.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/cdd/article/view/39728/35970>

Melissa Graham and Kevin Jackson, "Divided No More: The Toronto Disability Pride March and the Challenges of Inclusive Organizing" in Christine Kelly and Michael Orsini (eds.) *Mobilizing Metaphor: Art, Culture, and Disability Activism in Canada*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2016: 279-288.