



The Milwaukee Mental Health Task Force is committed to being a leader in identifying issues faced by all people affected by mental illness, facilitating improvements in mental health services, giving consumers and families a strong voice, reducing stigma, and implementing recovery principles.

The Milwaukee Mental Health Task Force Karen Avery Award – September 12, 2017

The Milwaukee Mental Health Task Force is very pleased to present the fourth *Karen Avery Award* to Shel Gross. This award was established to honor Karen's tremendous legacy as an advocate, mentor, peer, and leader in advancing the rights of people with disabilities.

About Shel Gross

Shel Gross, MPA, has been the Director of Public Policy for Mental Health America of Wisconsin (MHA) since April 2000. He has been a valued leader in advancing the expansion of community based mental health services that support recovery and independence, and has earned the respect of policy makers in Madison and Washington for his knowledge and eloquent advocacy. Shel serves as Project Manager for MHA's statewide Prevention/Early Intervention Initiative in Mental Health which has most recently focused on improving quality assurance within behavioral healthcare settings to reduce suicides in Wisconsin. Among his many contributions, Shel was a member and Chair of the Legislative and Policy Committee of the Wisconsin Council on Mental Health, a board member of the Wisconsin Prevention Network and a former co-chair of the Survival Coalition of Wisconsin Disability Organizations.



Shel and Karen Avery were founding Board Members of the Grassroots Empowerment Project (GEP), and worked closely with Molly Cisco and others to establish GEP. They shared a deep commitment to advancing the rights of people with independence, and to supporting the growth of a strong peer movement. As a trainer, speaker, and mentor, Shel has helped to elevate the voices of many Wisconsin peers in public policy advocacy.

He holds a Master's Degree in Public Policy from the LaFollette Institute for Public Affairs at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and has over 40 years of experience in the mental health field. Prior to his job with MHA he worked for eleven years as an Analyst for the Wisconsin Medicaid program, where he coordinated policy development for mental health and AODA services. Shel also work in several other positions supporting persons with disabilities.

About Karen Avery

Karen Avery was an advocate, a mentor, a peer, friend, and leader in the fight for disability rights, dedicated to giving power and independence to people with disabilities. She began her career as an advocate for fair housing, then joined *IndependenceFirst* in 1998 as Associate Director. A respected leader in the mental health consumer/ survivor movement, she worked to advance the rights of people with mental illness and ensure a strong consumer voice. Karen was a founding board member of the Grassroots Empowerment Project, and a leader in the Milwaukee Mental Health Task Force. She spoke about the system and about recovery with such impact, because she lived it. She was generous in sharing the challenges of her experience with mental illness and her recovery journey.



In her work as a leader in the disability movement, as well as to friends and family, Karen set the standard for being "selfless to a fault." She gave everything – her intellect, corny sense of humor, time, attention, empathy, kindness, authenticity, love of family, wonderful laugh, zest for life with a bit of indignation. Karen never wanted to be the center of attention in the public eye, but she was willing to speak truth to power to advance the rights of her peers – and, even more impactful, to mentor and encourage others in finding their voice. She was known for her T-shirts featuring irreverent messages – "Feisty and Non-compliant" was a classic. Karen was also an incredibly loving and caring Mother and Grandmother, and a treasured friend and mentor to so many.

When Karen passed away in 2013, the disability community lost a champion. The Milwaukee Mental Health Task Force established this award to honor Karen's legacy and her deep commitment to advancing the rights of people with disabilities, and to the mental health consumer movement.