

Gayle Bluebird received a Voice Award on October 13, 2010

Her two oldest grandchildren presented the award



Please welcome two very special guests, James Dean and Lovely Lily Blanchard.

James

My grandmother, Gayle Bluebird, is a dedicated mental health advocate and a true pioneer. I'm proud of my grandmother because I know that her work has revolutionized how consumers are served and treated in health care facilities around the country.

Long before my time, I know that Nana Bluebird began to experience deep sadness that emotionally separated her from her family. With the hope of reconnecting with her three children, she entered a residential treatment program, which she later realized was a repressive and punitive environment. Her experience there would lead her to the beginning of the consumer civil rights movement, which changed her life and the lives of millions.

My grandmother also worked as a psychiatric nurse, which gave her a unique perspective on the problems of the mental health system. She created Broward County, Florida's first Office of Consumer Affairs, and she later created the concept of "comfort rooms," where consumers can calmly recover from traumatic experiences as an alternative to the use of seclusion and restraint. This approach

is now common practice in hospitals throughout the country. She has written several guidebooks and continues to spread her message around the country. She also created and organization, Altered States of the Arts to network consumer artists, writers and performers.

Lily

Ladies and gentlemen, I am pleased to present the Consumer Leadership Award to my grandma, Gayle Bluebird.



Gayle Bluebird's acceptance talk:

Receiving this award at Paramount Studios—the red carpet, being in Hollywood, the glitter and glamour-- networking with movie stars, producers, meeting Roselyn Carter, is exciting! Having two grandchildren, Lovely Lily and James, to share it with me is equally rewarding.

I am so proud!!!

Today, as we all know the miners are coming up out of the mine shaft—coming up out of darkness they experienced for weeks and months—coming up to experience light and life again—all to be celebrated individually and collectively. I think it is fitting that we recognize them. (applause)

Today marks another stage of my own coming out of darkness to celebrate.

When I was a child, my mother called me “Orphan Annie”. I was not an orphan but I acted like an abandoned child. Years later I realized that Orphan Annie was an independent free spirit as I would later become.

In seventh grade I was asked to give a one-minute speech on the “color green”. I got up and collapsed instead. Years later I would become a public speaker.

Life for me got darker but I always knew that my weaknesses were my strengths. During one of my darkest times I joined the ex-patient movement. I protested abusive treatment in the mental health system with others.

As a psychiatric nurse I watched what happened to people when they were placed in seclusion rooms—sometimes for weeks—cell like rooms, not too different than the space in which the miners were located--with food slipped to them in rooms without light, unimaginable conditions to be called treatment. I envisioned comfort rooms and later created them.

I found doors to open and joined others who were also pioneers, now numbering in the thousands, consumer/survivors, working to change the entire culture of the mental health system. Many are working as peer specialists in community and inpatient settings; many developing their own peer-operated services-- drop-in centers, crisis alternatives, programs for consumers that are homeless. Others are doing research and sitting on decision-making bodies at all levels of federal and local government. Artists, too, are contributing to change, illustrating mental health issues as visual artists, writers, and performers.

We have much to celebrate!

Several people I want to acknowledge who helped me along my journey:

Kevin Huckshorn, the Mental Health and Substance Abuse Commissioner in Delaware; we have worked together for many years.

Natalie Reatig, the first national director of Protection and Advocacy Systems, who has always been my mentor;

Paolo del Vecchio, Consumer Affairs Director at the Center for Mental Health Services, SAMHSA. Together we have worked on many projects. "Thank you, Paolo." (Paolo was in the audience)

Many others have supported me along the way including other consumers, providers, family members and personal friends.

In closing, we are all doing what we thought we could never do. Somewhere deep down, instinctively, we knew that we could rise up from darkness, and we know that others can too.

We have much work ahead; liberating people from institutions to live full lives in the community, with our support, and helping people find their strengths instead of focusing on their weaknesses.

Today I am a trainer, a speaker, an innovator, a networker of artists; a "Bluebird", a name that I chose for myself, and a grandmother of 15.

Finally, I want to honor one more person, my daughter, Wendy, who experienced problems with mental illness and who died of breast cancer two years ago, leaving ten children, the oldest of whom are here with me. I know she would be proud of us today.

Thank you.