

PROTEA seeks to help clients, community

By Ben Baker
Staff Writer

At PROTEA Behavioral Health Services, growth is happening so fast that even the owners have a hard time keeping up with it. From renovating buildings to opening branch offices to providing mental health services to children and adults, PROTEA has many irons in the fire. Located at 187 Exchange Street in Bangor, the agency has been in business since January of this year, offering "whole person" mental health care to both children and adults.

The concept of "whole person" care is a theory of nursing, which PROTEA is applying to the mental health field. The concept was the subject of PROTEA Executive Director and founder Dr. Rowena Tessmann's doctoral thesis.

PROTEA is named after the national flower of South Africa, birthplace of founder Tessmann, and is also an acronym standing for Promote Realistic Opportunities Through Encouragement and advancement.

Tessmann's philosophy, in her own words, is "to look at the person as a whole, including the family, the community the (patient) lives in, the school (and) other care providers."

This system stresses the importance of working together with other care providers "to provide proper, effective service and not have it fragmented," Tessmann said.

"Client care cannot be provided in isolation," reads one of PROTEA's brochures. "To provide effective services, all aspects of the client's environment must be taken into consideration."

While Rowena Tessmann handles the clinical side of the business, her husband Alex Tessmann is in charge of keeping it financially viable.

In central Maine, he said, it isn't a matter of competing with other care

providers, but of "driving to meet a critical shortage." Currently there are about 380 children waiting for outpatient care, with another 271 needing help with medication management. At present, he said, these children are receiving no treatment.

To help meet this shortage PROTEA works with other agencies, providing resources and drawing on resources, when appropriate, to "achieve the best client care."

"We really want to work collaboratively," he said. "We're not in this to be beating anybody."

The primary reason for starting a business like PROTEA in Bangor, said Alex Tessmann, was that Rowena Tessmann "became aware of deficiencies, quantitatively and qualitatively, in the children's services area" in Bangor while working in the quality assurance department of the Department of Mental Health, Mental Retardation and Substance Abuse Services (DMHMRSAS).

Because of this, in August of 2000 they decided to start an agency specifically to address the need for more and improved in-home support services for children. It was while developing the business plan, he said, that a further need came to their attention. They discovered that many licensed social workers and counselors in the area were unable to provide services to Medicaid-eligible clients, because the individual caregivers could not bill Medicaid for their services.

So the Tessmanns determined, through negotiations with Medicaid and DMHMRSAS, that PROTEA would provide an umbrella of services under which the licensed social workers and counselors would be able to offer services to Medicaid clients.

"This thing has just picked up so much momentum," Alex Tessmann said. "The growth of the agency has really been quite phenomenal—driven by a critical shortage of... mental-health services."

He added that most of what PROTEA does involves providing services to Medicaid-eligible people who have had trouble accessing needed services.

"We have had superb cooperation from Medicaid," he said. "I would have to say that I am very impressed by the efficiency we've seen in the Medicaid system, considering the hundreds of thousands of claims they process each week."

The services offered by PROTEA include children's in-home support services, medication management, therapy, counseling for families, community education, professional development seminars and conferences, corporate (consulting) services and a professional network. The professional network is made up of

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- Alex Tessmann

psychiatrists, psychologists, licensed clinical social workers, licensed clinical professional counselors and advanced practice registered nurses.

Alex Tessmann is quick let his wife take center stage when it comes to defining what PROTEA is about. "Rowena started this thing, she's the founder," he said. "If Rowena thinks (an idea) meets the goals of the organization and is clinically sound, I figure out how to make it work financially, then we do it."

Rowena Tessmann came to Maine seven years ago to take a teaching position at the University of Maine at Fort Kent. Later she was appointed director of nursing for UMFK. After moving to Bangor, she worked for the Department of Mental Health, and served as a consultant to several area agencies. In addition to serving as PROTEA's executive director, she maintains a clinical case load, teaches classes at Husson College and University College of Bangor, takes classes in order to earn her prescriptive authority, and provides consulting services to other agencies and facilities.

"I think it's important, as the executive director, that I apply my clinical skills," she said of carrying a case load of clients. "It enables me to be able to be in contact and see what really goes on. You see it first hand, it's not just sitting behind a desk."

Alex Tessmann, who hails from Vancouver, British Columbia, has been self-employed, except for a few brief periods, since he was 18. He has been in the management consulting field for about 20 years, and last year moved to Maine full-time to help run PROTEA, leaving behind an accounting consultation business.

© continued on back



Weekly Photo/Ben Baker
Alex and Rowena Tessmann, founders of PROTEA Behavioral Health Services, pose for a picture in the agency's lobby. PROTEA, which offers mental health services to adults and children in the Bangor area, opened its doors this past January.

PROTEA seeks to help clients, community — Continued

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Currently, PROTEA employs about 40 part-time, in-home support workers and five licensed clinicians providing therapy and medication management. Twelve administrative staff people keep everything organized, and about 63 licensed independent practitioners operate under the PROTEA umbrella.

"It changes every week," Alex Tessmann said of PROTEA's workforce. PROTEA is a private company, funded solely from the Tessmanns' private resources, he noted.

Of the staff, he said their goal is to "have people that are on the ball, and have vision."

"My philosophy is that management works for staff," he said, "not the other way around. That being said, I'm a brutal taskmaster."

One aspect of PROTEA's employment philosophy is a tremendous focus on staff education, he noted.

"We go way beyond our minimum requirements," he said. "(We have an) extraordinarily high emphasis on staff training. Our minimum standards go considerably beyond the required minimums."

This management style "grows out of my experience of what works," he said. "(It) grows out of Rowena's and my expectations of life. Our philosophy is very inclusive, working with people — anybody that is a stakeholder in the process of delivering quality care. What we've accomplished seems to prove that our concept works."

Another aspect of the business currently being developed is the PROTEA Professional Development Center (PDC). Under the oversight of Mark Nutt, Education/Community Liaison Coordinator, PROTEA will seek

to offer training and development to clients, people from the community and professionals.

"Our goal is to offer training that is required for certain professionals ... in their area of discipline," he said. "There's certainly a need for what we're providing, which is why we're expanding so rapidly."

Through ongoing seminars and conferences, PROTEA PDC will both provide training to professionals and help educate clients and people from the community about the basics of counseling and therapy. Topics such as how an evaluation works when a child is brought in, what the different diagnoses mean, ways to work with the treatment team and other topics will help to "de-mystify" the process that may seem overwhelming, Nutt said.

PROTEA PDC's first presentation, by Dr. Susan Bailey, clinical director of the Machias River Clinic, took place on Aug. 31, focusing on the topic of documentation, with over seventy clinicians in attendance.

As the business has expanded, so has the space occupied. PROTEA currently occupies about 20,000 square feet in three buildings on Exchange Street, all of which are undergoing complete renovation. Classrooms, offices, meeting rooms, counseling areas and other facilities are all being designed, which will be linked by a high-speed computer network. On the third floor of the main building at 187 Exchange Street, a large high-ceilinged dance hall formerly known as "Society Hall," where the Bangor Symphony Orchestra played early in the 1900s, will be turned into a state-of-the art facility where video teleconferencing technology will allow people in Bangor to participate in long-distance seminars, or interact with outlying satellite offices.

"(We're) trying to bring back features of the old architecture," Alex Tessmann said. "The building has been badly under-utilized for 15 to 20 years. The objective is to maintain as much architectural integrity as we can."

Though the project "poses some very unique challenges," Tessmann has been able to discover some unique opportunities. For example, instead of throwing away the bricks left over from cutting doorways between the three buildings, he used many of them to build a working fireplace in a second-floor office. Part of the plan, he said, is to participate in the revitalization of downtown Bangor.

"There are some disadvantages to being here, but I fell in love with the old buildings," he said.

The total cost to renovate the three buildings, he said, will run in the range of one million dollars.

Looking to the future, Alex Tessmann said that PROTEA will open a satellite office in Ellsworth in mid-September, with the possibility of a second office in Dover-Foxcroft on the horizon as well. He said they are also considering bringing the Machias River Clinic into the PROTEA group as a satellite clinic. Tying the outlying clinics into the central office by means of high-speed video teleconferencing is a primary goal, he said.

Another future strategy, he said, is to serve as an incubator service for clinicians who want to go into private practice. Under such a system, clinicians could occupy office space in the PROTEA office, making use of the existing infrastructure as they build their names. Once established, they could venture out into private practice.

For more information on PROTEA, contact them at 992-7010.