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Patty Winsa

Alice Liang is an architect who believes in breaking down walls.

A partner with Toronto-based Montgomery Sisam architects, Liang was part of a team that designed and oversaw construction during the first phase of the new Centre for Addiction and Mental Health campus on Queen St. But when the buildings were finished, she didn't just walk away.

Instead, Liang founded the first corporate volunteer breakfast program for the hospital's clientele so that the staff and partners at her firm could learn what she had over the last decade.

The work at CAMH "really brought me very close to a group of people that I really, in my professional life, never had contact with," said Liang, who began consulting with patients in the mid-'90s as part of the design process. "My first exposure ... highlighted to me how ignorant and ill-informed I was about this population of people."

For Liang, the work took away the fear and stigma surrounding mental health.

"My thought was, the only good way of exposing our young architects and the staff in our firm to what I experienced was to bring them into that environment in some positive manner."

For more than two years, a core group of company staff has served breakfast two mornings each month at the Addiction Medicine Service, an outpatient clinic for addicts with mental health issues in the centre's College St. facility.

About 10 of the 36 employees participate, buying groceries, serving breakfast and staying to clean up.

Their work recently earned them a June Callwood Outstanding Achievement Award for Voluntarism, which recognizes creative and innovative community service.

The volunteers buy groceries and make breakfast in what is really 5-by-5-metre office, cooking hot food on a griddle they bought for that purpose.

Melissa Verge, the company's marketing manager, says volunteers have become so comfortable and friendly with everyone that they sit around and talk about news and sports with the clientele. It's "stuff that's not focused around their addiction or their mental health issues. It's just breakfast and chatting," she said. "When you start volunteering, you realize they are just people."

Beverley Clark, a clinic case worker, said she and her colleagues nominated Montgomery-Sisam because of their dedication and longevity, which has allowed them to form bonds with a population that "is not very trusting," she said. "It's the nature of addiction. It's about being isolated."

About 90 per cent of the patients have mental health issues, says therapist Cindy De Sousa, who wrote the nomination letter. The volunteers get to know the regulars — individuals and couples — who come once or twice a month. "You get to know them and you get to know their stories," said Verge.

Over breakfast one morning, a woman who had stayed in one of the new CAMH buildings even gave them some feedback. She "really liked the fact that she could open her bedroom window," said Verge. "When you're coming off of drugs, being able to control the temperature ... would seem like such a basic thing, but to them it's great."

The clinic runs the week-long breakfast program at the end of each month and Clark, along with case worker Carolyn Shim, make breakfast



Architect Alice Liang and her company received the June Calwood award for the breakfast program they participate in as volunteers at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health.

Colin McConnell/Toronto Star

on the remaining three days. She says the clients never had a hot breakfast before because the clinic couldn't afford it.

"I think they love the clients," she said of the volunteers. "They've watched them grow and celebrated with clients."

Verge says the company's history of community service was one of the reasons she joined it. Before CAMH, the firm designed Belmont House, a seniors' residence, and ran a volunteer program there for four years.

"A lot of our clients are not-for-profits and special-needs groups," says Verge, "so it's kind of nice to actually work at a company that is doing something that you really care about."

Verge, who keeps track of the volunteer rotation, is now trying to organize a night when the firm's staff can provide dinner, for a nominal fee, at Ronald McDonald House, which provides housing for parents of seriously ill children undergoing hospital treatment nearby.

Verge said getting the award felt "kind of funny. Our contribution is so small compared to what Beverley and Carolyn do ... It just seems like a small commitment and something we really enjoy."

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