



Let's Talk! Schizophrenia Society of Ontario proves every conversation counts

Speakers Bureau members share stories of living with psychosis and schizophrenia, empowering others to break silence

(Toronto) FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: Ahead of Bell Let's Talk Day, the country's largest day in support of mental illness and engaging Canadians in conversations around the challenges and hopes for people living with mental illness, the Schizophrenia Society of Ontario (SSO) is looking to highlight and help share the inspiring stories of its Speakers Bureau.

SSO's Speakers Bureau features speakers who want to share their personal experience with mental illness and how it has impacted them directly or how it affected them through a family member or loved one. Their stories of strength, experience and determination often inspire but also help educate others about schizophrenia and psychosis, opening the conversation to a better understanding of what it means to live with these conditions.

"Personally, and as an organization, I'm proud of what we've been able to build with our Speakers Bureau," says Mary Alberti, CEO of SSO. "We believe strongly that open conversations and truly hearing the voices of those we're trying to help are critical in not only shifting the conversation for the better but in seeing a real, actionable change. Through our Speakers Bureau program, we're showcasing how every action and every conversation counts, starting from something as simple and as powerful as sharing the often untold stories of those living with and affected by mental illness."

Raising awareness and sharing stories about mental illness helps with the goal of making a positive difference in the lives of individuals, families and communities impacted by schizophrenia and psychosis and creates more inclusive communities for those impacted by mental illness.

Featuring a variety of speakers, including Shane Christensen, a caregiver and advocate and writer ([*Kicking the Darkness, a memoir*](#)), Linda Monteith-Gardiner, an artist and photographer living with schizoaffective disorder, and Chris Whittaker, a long-time advocate living with schizophrenia, the Speakers Bureau is a collection of volunteers with countless years of valuable life experiences and expertise they share with communities across the province.

Linda, much like the others on the Speakers Bureau, wants to tell her story to emphasize the importance of early intervention. "I often wonder how my life would be different if I got the help I needed at 17 instead of in my thirties," Linda says. "I want to start the conversation about psychosis and bring it into the mainstream to educate people."

Chris Whittaker, long-standing member of SSO's Speakers Bureau and seasoned personal experience speaker living with schizophrenia, could not agree more about the importance of receiving early support. "Early intervention was key to my journey of recovery with schizophrenia," Chris asserts. As a personal experience speaker, Chris has presented through the Speakers Bureau to the Emergency Measures Task Force and a first year paramedic college class, among many others.

Shane Christensen knows the power of early intervention as well and how starting conversations can mean the difference between someone struggling with their mental illness and thriving. Shane's perspective on mental illness and schizophrenia is based upon a lifetime of experiences with close family members – along with difficulties experienced by his parents, he unfortunately lost his brother to suicide. His son lives with diagnosed schizophrenia and Shane is his key caregiver and advocate. “Throughout my entire lifetime, I have witnessed a gradual and incredible change in the reduction of societal stigma. A generation ago there was only fear and silence. Today, productive and positive conversations are taking place which leads to a greater understanding of mental illness. Let’s keep the conversations going to continue to bring hope and positivity to a very difficult situation, and to also demonstrate that no one has to feel that they are alone simply because they are experiencing an illness of any kind.”

“As we just finished celebrating our 40th anniversary, I have never been more excited about the opportunities ahead. The time is right for conversations around more difficult mental illness to be had, and thanks to Bell Let’s Talk, we feel we’re able to have those harder conversations earlier than we ever would have imagined,” says Mary Alberti, CEO of SSO.

To learn more about the Schizophrenia Society of Ontario, you can visit us [online](#) and follow us on [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#), and [Twitter](#).

Schizophrenia Society of Ontario speakers are available for pre-Bell Let’s Talk day coverage, and are available day of for phone, in-person, and on-air opportunities. Our available list of speakers and their bios are below.

Media Contact

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About Schizophrenia Society of Ontario: Schizophrenia Society of Ontario is a mental health initiative focused on making a positive difference in the lives of people, families and communities affected by schizophrenia and psychotic illnesses. Having just celebrated their 40th anniversary, they have helped hundreds of thousands of Canadians and have grown into a leading authority on schizophrenia and psychosis across North America. <https://www.schizophrenia.on.ca/>

About Bell Let’s Talk: The Bell Let’s Talk mental health initiative is focused on 4 key action pillars: Anti-stigma, Care and Access, Research and Workplace Leadership. Since its launch in September 2010, Bell Let’s Talk has partnered with more than 900 organizations providing mental health services throughout Canada, including major donations to hospitals, universities and other care and research organizations. <https://letstalk.bell.ca/en/>

Available Speakers:

Shane Christensen, Caregiver and Advocate

Shane is a caregiver to an adult son with schizophrenia and his perspective on mental illness and schizophrenia is based upon a lifetime of experiences with close family members. Shane's core belief to overcoming adversity is to maintain a positive outlook and a healthy lifestyle, and to accept the reality that life can be difficult, yet rewarding. He has experienced the heartbreaking loss of loved ones but has revelled in his son's triumph over mental illness. He sums up the importance of maintaining happiness and quality of

life by borrowing from a Bruce Cockburn classic: *You kick at the darkness until it bleeds daylight!* Shane loves to travel, works in civil service and in the past spent more than 10 years volunteering with a local auxiliary police service.

Linda Monteith Gardiner, Lived Experience Speaker

An artist and photographer living with schizoaffective disorder, Linda is a member of SSO's **Speaker's** Bureau. When Linda stepped on stage to give her high school valedictorian address, she was experiencing her first manic episode. Linda wants to tell her story to emphasize the importance of early intervention and to help eliminate the stigma around schizophrenia and psychosis.

Chris Whittaker, Lived Experience Speaker

When Chris was 23, his parents became concerned about his behaviour. His calls home became filled with delusional thoughts about people conspiring against him. Fearing for his health and well-being, Chris' parents took him to hospital. He was diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia and immediately became active in his care and recovery. As a result, he was able to quickly build a support network of family and friends to help him as he pushed forward in his journey towards mental health and wellness.