



Photo: Michael Hattingh

Leaving Early For Work:
A Dream Shared By
Many Persons Living
With Mental Illness

A very generous effort

best describes Oscar January's contribution to mental health advocacy locally. He was leader of his Athlone-based support group in 1999 and joined the Cape Consumer Advocacy Body (CCAB) in 2000. He represented CCAB at HIV/AIDS seminars in Johannesburg in 2001 and Durban in 2007. In 2011 he attended the Kari Gude Literacy Seminar in Johannesburg. He was the chairperson of CCAB from 2007 to 2014, and an active member of the South African Mental Health Advocacy Movement. He has served as a community representative on the Valkenberg Hospital Facility Board and on the Community Advisory Board of UCT's "Genomics of Schizophrenia In South African Xhosa People Project".

His activity in the field of mental health advocacy provided him his first opportunity to get back into the work stream. In May this year Oscar secured permanent employment after being contracted for a period of one year. His message to those living with mental illness and who are looking for work, is straightforward: "BE MOTIVATED". Don't say, "I'm going to make a life with my disability grant". This

provides a very limited opportunity that only goes a short way. Resources run out fast."

Employment opportunities for persons living with mental illness are scarce and one of the reasons for this is the associated stigma. Although the Employment Equity Law is in place, it is well known that employers are reluctant to hire or promote persons living with mental illness. The concern of being stigmatised in the workplace discourages those living with mental illness from actively seeking employment. Many miss the opportunity of being employed and struggle to move on in life. Sadly, this is where society is today, after all these years of campaigning for our rights.

In Oscar's positive words, "Knowing your potential is the first step to finding meaningful activity - WORK ! Unlock your potential and see how it can be applied. When you find work you've got to make your mental health your number one priority. Your survival demands that you are motivated, that you know your rights, and that you take responsibility for your health issues."

Oscar leaves for work every weekday at 7am.