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Contact Patti Jo Severson, pjseverson@charter.net

SHINING STAR AWARDS MAY 9; AWARD RECIPIENT NAMED

LA CROSSE, Wis—Viroqua native Ken Weinberg, a founding member of Vernon County's The Other Door Drop-In Center, and a peer support person who is active in his community in the addiction and mental health recovery movement, will receive the 2017 Shining Star Award May 9 at a program and reception hosted by the Mental Health Coalition (MHC).

The event is scheduled from 4:30-6 p.m. in the Cargill Room at Riverside Center II.

Weinberg, 67, has a story of his own that supports the volunteer work he does with others in recovery. He lived in the Milwaukee area for nearly 40 years working in various businesses. While there, he struggled with a variety of self esteem issues that led to alcohol and drug addiction and depression as well as other mental health issues. "While I was successful at work, I was good with denial and was living out of a shell," Weinberg said. "I didn't have a healthy adult life, was miserable and lonely and barely coping. I finally got help, went into recovery and that was 18 years ago."

Weinberg and a colleague, John Cox who was a peer specialist with Family Children's Center conceived of the idea of The Other Door which came about as a result of their organizing efforts. Started in 2012, the Center which is open 20 hours a week, describes itself as a safe space for people during their mental health and substance abuse recovery.

Located in the basement of FCC, Weinberg indicated The Other Door logs about 5000 visitors a year. "I am grateful to FCC and The Other Door for giving us all a chance to improve our lives," Weinberg said.

One of Weinberg's award nominators cited his determination saying, "He inspires me to remember that anything is possible with passionate people. He is a very strong example of lived mental health and addictions recovery and he is eager to help others grow in their own recovery. I continue to be amazed at how he continues to work at his own wellness while not judging where others are on their journey."

Another nominator said, "Ken is able to meet people where they are and immediately moves to a place of deep listening. He is empathic, clear, and honest. Recovery is his passion. He's honest about himself and warm and engaging."

Weinberg spends most of his time being present to listen and earn the trust of those who stop by regardless of the issue. “They might be lonely, isolated, bored, or even unsafe without The Other Door. Trust and acceptance is what is important.”

Aaron Rasch, who is with Project Recovery at Western Technical College, provided training for Weinberg near the time The Other Door started up, noted Weinberg realized people needed to have a place to go even on the holidays and on a several occasions volunteered to staff the facility on Christmas.

For now, it’s all about giving back. The Open Door is peer run. “Whoever I meet, I welcome them to talk. I let my face go neutral so that I reflect whatever they want to talk about or are feeling without judgment or without any agenda on my part. All I have to offer is acceptance,” Weinberg said.

For Rasch, Weinberg’s presence is incalculable. “He is a teacher who listens. You can empower others and that’s what he does. He has a humble approach that is accessible. He doesn’t need a title. He’s respected for who he is.”

Over 100 friends, mental health providers and members of the community are expected to attend the Shining Star Award.

Don and Roxanne Weber are serving as sponsors of the event. For more information on the Shining Star award or the Mental Health Coalition, visit: www.mentalhealthlacrosse.org.