

Psychiatrist and Human Rights Activist
Dr. Robert Okin Wants All Americans to See the
Faces and Listen to the Stories of Our Society's
Most Overlooked Outcasts:

THE MENTALLY ILL AND HOMELESS

From L.A. to Philly to Miami, they're out there—pushing their carts, digging through garbage, sleeping on park benches, sometimes ranting about nonsense to no one. They often look and sound crazy, smell bad, and make us uneasy, so we avoid them. We know better intellectually, yet most of us shun people suffering from homelessness and mental illness because we view them as deeply flawed—somehow less human than the rest of us.

As part of his career devoted to the mentally disabled, **Dr. Robert Okin** decided to use a powerful artistic medium to advocate for these people. In ***SILENT VOICES: People with Mental Disorders on the Street*** (Golden Pine Press, October 2014), Dr. Okin invites all of us to get to know the people society treats like pariahs, people who, beneath their symptoms and rags, struggle with feelings and needs similar to those of the rest of us. He shares the striking and evocative photographs and stories—most often, in their own words—of more than 40 mentally ill people he met on the streets of San Francisco. “I wrote this book,” Dr. Okin reflects, “to contribute to making these people known as human beings.”

SILENT VOICES offers a glimpse of the dark pasts—marked by abuse, violation, tragedies, crime, drugs, and addiction—and everyday challenges of homeless men and women suffering from bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, and other serious mental disabilities. Among the people who come to life in its pages:

- Donna, who started living on the streets (and smoking crack) after she lost her job as a maid, thirteen years ago, and once had four of her ribs broken by a boyfriend over a disagreement about a taco.
- Linda, a transgender person, who, as a young child, had his arm broken and feet scorched at the hands of his parents and who grapples to control his violent outbursts and to remember what his mother looked like.
- Jeff, brought up by a mentally ill mother, who kept his grip on sanity until he lost his job as a garbage collector. Joblessness and drugs led to homelessness and his greatest source of shame: the loss of his teeth.

Based on his interviews, research, and decades of professional experience, Dr. Okin discusses:

- ❖ Staggering facts on how the mentally ill are neglected, mistreated, and discriminated against. In America today, over **200,000 people with mental disorders are abandoned in the streets** and another **250,000 are locked up in jails and prisons**.
- ❖ Measures needed to reduce the widespread, escalating problem of the homeless mentally ill, including increased government funding for **affordable housing**, partnerships between the public and private sector to provide **job training**, and **legal reform**.
- ❖ The critical need for well-trained, dedicated professional **clinical case managers**. “Without excellent clinical case managers, a mental health system will tend to be mechanistic, inaccessible, and exclusively focused on the management of symptoms with medication, rather than also on clients’ human development and rehabilitation,” Dr. Okin asserts.
- ❖ What everyone can do to overcome the stigma of mental illness and prevent homelessness, with the goal of not just social acceptance for people with mental illness but genuine **inclusion** in society. “Treatment cannot occur first and inclusion second,” stresses Dr. Okin.

Robert L. Okin, MD, served as chief of psychiatry at San Francisco General Hospital and professor of clinical psychiatry at the University of California, San Francisco, for 17 years. He is also a former state commissioner of mental health for both Vermont and Massachusetts. Throughout his career, he developed crucial services and clinical case management programs to enable mentally ill people to live with dignity in the community. A member of the board of advisors of Disabilities Rights International (DRI), he has provided psychiatric advocacy and consultation for missions to Mexico and Turkey, among many other countries, to investigate human rights violations in mental institutions. He lives in San Francisco.

For more information, for a review copy of the book, or to interview the author, please contact Javier Perez, 949.254.3214 or pturnerpub@aol.com.