Full transcript of an interview with

REGINALD COLIN ZACHER

on 15 March 2003

By Rae Howison

Recording available on CD

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Interview with Reginald Colin Zacher recorded by Rae Howison on 15th March 2003 at Port Adelaide Mental Health Service, South Australia, for the Mental Illness Fellowship Oral History Project.

TAPE 1 SIDE A

This is Rae Howison interviewing Reg Zacher on the 15th March 2003 at the Port Adelaide Mental Health Centre about his experiences of mental illness. Reg, thank you for coming along today to be part of our oral history project. To begin, I would like to ask a few questions about your background. Reg, what was your full name?

Reginald Colin Zacher.

And when is your date of birth?

Tenth of October nineteen hundred and thirty-six.

And, Reg, where were you born?

I was born at Murray Bridge.

Reg, can you tell us a little bit about your family situation?

Yes, my father’s name was Arch, and he worked for the Telecom Engineering Branch. My mother’s name was Joyce, and she didn’t work anywhere. She did most of the work at home. (laughs)

And, Reg, do you have any brothers and sisters?

Yes, Geoffrey, Diane and James.

And how do you fit in with the family?

I’m the eldest one.

Okay. And whereabouts did you live as a child?

I lived a couple of years at Wambi, where my grandfather had a farm, and then I went to Bordertown and I was there for the next seventeen years. And then I went to Elizabeth when I was – in ’56 we went to Elizabeth, and I stayed there right up until now, except for three years in Darwin.

Thank you. Now, Reg, your schooling education, tell us a little bit about that.
Well, I went to – the school I went to was at Bordertown High and Primary School. Actually, I started school in Adelaide, at a primary school, but after the bombing of Darwin episode we felt we’d be safer out in the country, so we shifted back to Bordertown. And I started up in Grade One there and went right through to Grade Nine.

And, Reg, what happened then? Did you have a job at that stage?

I started working in the Post Office, for Australia Post, delivering telegrams, and working night shift in the telephone exchange, manual telephone exchange.

And how long did you do that for, then?

I kept working for Australia Post for forty years. I was only about three years delivering telegrams, then I was a postman for twenty years at Gawler.

Reg, can you tell me about your first experiences of mental illness?

Well, I didn’t know much about it at the time, but in hindsight, being wise after the event, I had lots of thought disorders at school, occasional motivation, and every now and then I’d have a hallucination – sometimes visual ones, when I was umpiring a cricket match and didn’t give people out when they were getting out, and things like that, because I was having visual hallucinations of something else happening. And the same thing happened in other sporting things. I’d have visual – I played snooker, and I’d have visual hallucinations of my opponent playing foul shots when he wasn’t. Well, I didn’t know what they were. It didn’t – you know, I wasn’t aware of mental illness at the time.

Did you talk to anyone about what was happening?

No, not really.

So had you had any experience of mental illness?

No.

Did you – not understanding?

No.

Reg, can you tell me a little bit about the first time you went into hospital?
Well, my case is a little bit unusual compared with most people, because even though I had those early symptoms I didn’t get a full-blown psychosis until I was nearly forty. Then they really set in fairly quickly – auditory hallucinations mostly – and I spent – as hard as I tried to get in – the Darwin Hospital was rather strange at the time. I tried to get into hospital lots of times (laughs) and couldn’t, and then finally got in there and I spent a few weeks in there.

And how did you get into hospital? Did you – what? – go through a doctor, or – – –?

I went through a private doctor, who sent me to the Darwin Hospital there.

So when you went to hospital – tell us a little bit about what happened when you went into hospital?

Well, it was a rather strange hospital, because we had geriatrics and psychiatrics mixed up in the same ward. And I had never been in hospital before, it was my first experience. And the nursing staff were very good, and it was – I didn’t like the food very much. But it wasn’t too bad, I suppose.

Reg, at the time did your family know what was happening? Did you – – –?

Well, they were in Adelaide and I was in Darwin. It was only sort of ringing them up and telling them.

Were they surprised?

Oh, no. They were always very supportive.

Did you have any friends in Darwin to help you?

Yes, some friends that worked with me. And they used to pick me up every weekend when I was ill or something and take me to their place for the weekend, so that was very good.

Did they visit you in hospital?

Some of my people I worked with did, yes.

They were understanding?

Yes.

Can you remember what happened on the first day you went into hospital?
I think so. I just saw a psychiatrist who I thought was a rather strange person. And she just said, ‘Oh, well, we’ll just treat you with Stelazine[?] and see what happens.’ But she was – instead of doing ward visits and going round like they usually do, she used to line everybody up on the lawn, like you were in the Army. (laughs)

**What were the other people like in hospital? You already mentioned it a little bit, but perhaps, you know, you might be able to tell us a little bit more.**

Well, I’d never had any experience – it was very strange, because I’d never experienced a hospital at all, let alone mental part, and I thought it was strange when one man used to tip his food on the floor and eat it off the floor with a knife and fork. And another one used to go round getting everybody’s clothes that he could find and putting them on, and they’d all be the wrong sizes for him and everything. We had an occupational therapist who used to take us fishing, things like that. So I didn’t mind it, really.

**So did the days – were they long or were they short, do you remember?**

Those were fairly long, because you’d get out of bed in the morning and make your bed and they wouldn’t let you back near it. But I found a beanbag in a room no-one used, so I used to sneak in there and go to sleep on the beanbag.

**And I was going to ask about the sleeping arrangements – were they comfortable, did you share a room?**

Oh, it was the one big ward with lots of beds in it.

**And how did you feel about that?**

Oh, okay.

**And the routine at the hospital, what time did they expect you to get up in the morning?**

Oh, I don’t think there was any strict routine. I can’t remember now. It was a long time ago. But I don’t have any complaints about it, or anything.

**So you felt that you were well looked after in the hospital at that stage?**

Yes, the nursing staff were very good.

**You mentioned food, the hospital food.**

I didn’t like the food very much.
Tell us a little bit more about the hospital food.

I didn’t like it very much.

**What sort of food was it?**

Oh, I don’t know – just ordinary bulk-cooked food, I suppose. So I told one of the – I told the Matron at the time, and he said, ‘Oh,’ he said, ‘if you want to go and get your own somewhere, please do it.’ (laughs)

**And did you?**

Yes, I used to go out and get my own somewhere.

And we’re talking about how you felt about being in hospital. So, Reg, what sort of treatment did you have from the nursing staff and the doctors? You did say you liked being in hospital, but perhaps we could talk a little bit more about that.

It was really good once I was in there, but I made about five attempts to get in there, and kept on striking people who kept sending me back to work all the time. That was the biggest problem, was trying to get admitted.

**So that was quite difficult.**

Oh, that was, yes.

**Do you know why that was difficult?**

I don’t know. My boss from work kept sending me to hospital because I was ineffective at work, and every time I got to hospital they’d send me back to work again, and they didn’t appear to – – –. And the private doctor sent me to hospital with a note to see the psychiatrist, and some other doctor saw me, didn’t tell me he wasn’t the psychiatrist, and sent me back to work again. My sense of humour came to the fore then. I thought, ‘Well, maybe this hospital’s run by the Marx brothers.’ So (laughs) it didn’t worry me very much, I just had a bit of a laugh about it. But once I got in there it was great, there was no problem at all.

**Reg, did anything really awful happen, that you feel comfortable about talking about, in the hospital?**

No.

**No?**

No.
Good experiences.

Yes, it was all right, yes.

Well, do you have anything else, perhaps, that you remember?

Oh, yes, I do remember once I sneaked out and went to the pictures, and it was *One flew over the cuckoo’s nest*. That wasn’t very nice.

Reg, did you – can you remember speaking to the other people, the other patients in the hospital at that time?

Yes, yes.

That was fine?

That was okay, yes.

Anything else wonderful happen that you can think of?

Oh, no. Everything was strange about the hospital up there. We used to have a couple of kids used to turn up every night – I don’t know where they came from – and come and ask us to switch the TV on. I don’t know where they came from or who they belonged to, they just used to wander into the hospital every night and watch TV. (laughter)

Reg, how old were you then, when you were admitted to hospital, or when you were – – –?

I was just going on forty.

Forty.

Yes.

Reg, you were talking about your friends being very supportive –

Yes.

– and your workplace colleagues being very supportive.

Yes, yes.

Did you go back to work after you came out of hospital?

No, that’s when trouble started again. Nobody gave me any referrals, or nobody – and I didn’t get any diagnosis. So we had trouble trying to get it from the hospital,
so we went through the Department of Health, and they weren’t much help, either. And in the end I got called in at work to say that they’d – someone had given me six months’ sick leave, I don’t know who it was, so I went on six months’ sick leave without any (laughs) referrals or any diagnosis. And fortunately the medication I was taking took care of the most of the hallucinations I was having, but I had a lot of trouble with akathisia\(^1\), the restlessness, I kept walking and walking and walking. And for six months – I spent some with my brothers, some with my parents. I must have driven them up the wall, but they didn’t complain about it.

And then I went back to work again, and then I thought, ‘Well, this is no good, being here,’ so I got transferred to Adelaide. And I went to work in the Mail Exchange in Gouger Street, where there were lots and lots of people. And I did really well there for a long time, even got promoted a couple of times. But the illness kept on trying to come back all the time. It was very difficult to overcome. And after quite a few years there it got to the stage where I just couldn’t work any longer. So I got superannuated out.

But then I had enormous amount of problems with the superannuation people, because they have to pay you more if you get supered out. So they kept on writing – I kept on getting letters from medical people. At one stage I had the Personnel people at work, my general practitioner, the Commonwealth Medical Officer and two psychiatrists saying that I couldn’t work any longer, and I had the superannuation people saying that I could. (laughs)

**So how did you feel about that?**

Well, it was – I wasn’t very happy about it. And one day I got a knock on the door and I went there – and I was on sick leave – and this lady said, ‘I’m a registered nurse, I’ve come from Sydney to do an assessment.’ And I thought, ‘Well, I’ve got all these people who are more than registered nurses doing it.’ So I went back and saw my psychiatrist and he sat down and wrote out a letter straight away, and he said, ‘If they’ve got anything between their ears they’ll know this is a threat to take them to court.’ And they changed their mind in two days. So I had a very

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\(^1\) Akathisia – a side effect of some medications which causes a feeling of restlessness.
supportive psychiatrist as well, who was willing to go in to bat for me, which was very good.

**From what you say it seems like your experience with mental health services overall have been pretty good, very supportive?**

It was fairly good with the mental health services. It was only these other extraneous services that were the big problem – that I had a problem with. Although one day I got into Adelaide on the train to go to work, and I was very, very ill, and I wasn’t quite sure what was happening, and so I managed to find – I thought, ‘Well, what am I going to do?’ And I managed to find my way to Glenside – I don’t know how I got there – and then they said, ‘Where do you live?’ And I said, ‘I live at Elizabeth,’ and they said, ‘Well, you can’t come here, you have to go to Hillcrest.’ So I don’t even know how I found my way to Hillcrest. I wasn’t very happy about that.

**Were you – you were driving a car at the time?**

No, I wasn’t driving a car. I must have caught a bus – I think I got a taxi to Hillcrest. Not sure how I got to Glenside.

**So did you have somebody who would help drive you to and from the hospital when you needed to go, or were you pretty much on your own?**

I was mostly on my own, yes. Yes, I had to find my own way around.

**And was that difficult, was that difficult?**

No.

**No, you managed pretty well?**

I’ve managed pretty well. I don’t drive at all now because I’ve got a sleeping problem and I can’t drive, so I have to get buses and trains now, so it doesn’t affect me very much.

**Reg, how did you feel when you found that you weren’t going to be able to go back to work because of your illness?**

But I’d worked – well, I was lucky, because I had worked for a long time, and it wasn’t too bad. If I’d been a lot younger it wouldn’t have been probably very good, because – – –. And another point that I’d like to bring up here is that when I was given six months’ sick leave I had saved up two years’ sick leave. And people
wouldn’t be able to do that now. I wouldn’t be able to do it now, because they only have people in part-time and temporary jobs now, where we had full-time jobs. So I would not be able to work as long as I did.

So in that sense you were very fortunate, really.

Yes, yes.

Reg, how many times were you – have you been in hospital more than once?

No, only that – – –.

Just the one hospital admission?

Just the once, yes. Yes.

So you’ve been fortunate, again, not to have to return to hospital.

That’s right. I was very lucky in that way, that if I took a medication it started working fairly quickly, and I didn’t have to stay in – didn’t have any long stays in hospitals trying to get it right, or anything like that.

Reg, during this time have your family always been supportive?

Oh, yes, very supportive.

And have you still maintained friendships with other people you’ve known through your life?

Yes, I still see some of the people that I associated with in Darwin, and the ones that used to take me to their place every weekend, I see them at least once a week now.

So, Reg, what about – you were saying your illness meant you couldn’t return to work. Do you continue – do you have other hobbies or activities –

Well –

– that you still pursue?

– yes, well, I like – I’m a member of the Education Group of the Schizophrenia Fellowship and I like giving talks on mental illness and my experiences, and do quite a lot of that. And I like making electronic gadgets and things, so do quite a lot of that. And there’s a problem that arises: I’ve made my own hi-fi and everything, and I can do all the practical stuff myself, but I have problems trying to learn the theory bit. Even though I can do it, to try and – because of the way my brain gets mixed up
when I try to do something that’s written, I have problems trying to pass any theoretical things about electronics or anything like that.

**Reg, you mentioned you were a member of the Schizophrenia Fellowship —**

Yes.

— **and how long have you been a member of the Fellowship?**

I don’t know how many years I’ve been a member of it now. Quite a few years.

**How old are you now? You’re sixty-six —**

Yes.

— **is that right? And how long do you think you’ve been involved – would it be, what, five years or longer?**

Oh, probably. I’ve got a very good memory for events that happen, but I’ve got a terrible memory for when they happened. So I don’t know.

**And you mentioned that you do public education —**

Yes, yes.

— **about mental illness.**

Yes, yes, I like doing that, yes.

**Reg – – –.**

And I’m also – I’m a member of the Billiard and Snooker Association. I play lots of billiards and snooker.

**We’re talking a little bit about your day-to-day life and how things are for you now. But one question I would like to ask is how you feel that this experience has changed your life.**

What’s that?

**How do you feel the experience, your experience of having a mental illness, how has it changed your life?**

Actually, it was a lot better when I had a diagnosis, and I was able to accept all the conditions that it imposed on me when I realised what the problem was. Before that it was a bit confusing. But what I did was I did a lot of research into mental illness, and every time I had a symptom I would say to myself, ‘It’s only a few chemicals
gone bung in my brain. It’s not really happening at all.’ But you have to be very persistent and very patient. You have to do it for a long, long time. And then, after a while, I’ve got rid of a lot of the symptoms like that. They don’t come back. But you have to do it lots of times.

So, Reg, perhaps you could say that being the sort of person you are has actually helped you –

That’s right.

– to manage your illness – – –.

Yes. Except that, every now and then, the illness will try to superimpose itself on me. Recently I’ve had that problem. I’d just like to mention quickly instead of going home on the train for three dollars I was getting taxis for forty dollars, just in the last few weeks, and I realised there was something wrong and I went and saw my psychiatrist, and I started up on another medication again – just yesterday. So hopefully that’ll get back to normal again.

Reg, were you about forty in Darwin when you –

Yes.

– first went to hospital You’re sixty-six now, and go back twenty-six years –

Yes.

– of managing with your illness. And just another question: what are you hoping for in the future?

I haven’t got enormous expectations of the (laughs) future, really. You’ve got to be realistic about these things. Long as I can – the only thing I would like to happen in the future was to be able to overcome the sleeping problem I have that prevents me from driving. So I can go fishing and do trips like that, so there’s no need to try and find someone that wants to go with me or can drive. (laughs) That’s the only problem I have at the moment.

And, Reg, how long is it now since you haven’t driven your car?

Nearly two years now, nearly two – a bit over two years.

So that’s made it a little bit more difficult –

Yes.
– to pursue the things you used to do?

Yes.

And, Reg, what do you do each day? Can you just give us an idea of what you do each day to fill the day, and what some of your interests are?

Oh, well, I live in the unit on my own. I try not to spend very much time there, if I can. I spend some time at my sister’s place, because that’s where I’ve got a lot of my things stored and tools and that that I use for different things and I like making fishing rods and that kind of thing, and I can’t do it in the unit because it’s too small. And quite often I go into the Billiards and Snooker Association where we have matches and so forth – I might referee games and things like that. And then I spend a fair bit of time at the Fellowship, either just talking to people there – which is very interesting – or just arranging talks or something.

How often would you go to the Fellowship?

Oh, I might go there a couple of times a week, or even more sometimes.

And you spend a large part of the day at the Fellowship?

Yes. If I’m going anywhere else I’ll always end up at the Fellowship either early or before I have to go anywhere, or after, if I’ve got time.

Reg, you talked a little, spoke a little bit about being an educator. Can you talk a little bit more about that? What sort of people – who do you educate?

Well, I mainly talk to – it’s a little bit different from different kinds of people. Sometimes I talk to medical students and nursing students and so forth, and I usually tell them about the ways – I tell everyone about the ways I use, strategies I use, to keep well. But it’s – I prefer talking to medical students or someone with a little bit of knowledge, then I don’t have to go through statistics. I can give them a detailed description of what it was like to actually experience all these hallucinations and delusions and so forth, and they seem to be quite happy with that, to get a first-hand knowledge of what it actually feels like.

When I’m talking to other consumers, I like to keep telling them about the things that I do to keep well, but I have to tell them first that I’m not trying to tell them what they do, I’m just trying to tell them what I do, because I don’t want to try and tell people what they should do.
And then I talk to field officers like from the Housing Trust or someone, something like that. I try to emphasise the fact that, if they go to someone’s house, they might find a mess, and the people there will feel badly about it and would like to do something about it, but they’ve got this illness that just won’t let them. I think that’s an important part, too, so people will realise that these people will feel very badly and ashamed about the situation they’re in, but they can’t do anything about it because the illness won’t let them.

**Reg, how do you feel in yourself about being able to help people in doing this education?**

Well, first of all, when I first started giving these talks, I started remembering all some of the horrible symptoms I had and had forgotten about, and I thought, ‘What am I going to do about this?’ And I thought, ‘Well, maybe it’s better to remember them under these circumstances than just remember them any old time.’ So I kept going and doing all right. And so I haven’t had any problems with some of the horrible things I’ve remembered. (laughs)

**Reg, in speaking with you today it really comes across you have a very good sense of humour.**

Yes.

**And how important has that been?**

Oh, that’s tremendously important. One of the best things I ever did was one day I just got a bit of paper and I wrote on the top of it, ‘Why I am lucky.’ And, first of all, I wrote that I’m an optimist, and secondly I wrote that I’ve got a good sense of humour, and they’re the two things that kept me going all this time.

**Reg, have you experienced any stigma or rejection from people because of your illness, and has this changed over the years?**

Well, I haven’t experienced direct stigma at all, but I’ve heard indirect sort of thing that, ‘Oh,’ you know. A couple of times you’ll hear people refer to other people like, ‘Oh, they must be – – –.’ Call them names like – oh, I can’t think of the names there – so I always correct them, always tell them. I never ever – I always tell people my experience. I’ve heard people say, ‘Oh, they must be loonies,’ or something like that. So I immediately tell them, ‘Well, I’ve got schizophrenia – do
you think I’m a loony?’ You know. So that’s the way I’ve gone about it. But I’ve never had any direct stigma.

Reg, twenty-six years ago, when you were first diagnosed and in hospital –

Yes.

– what was it like then? Did you have a sense there was stigma associated with mental illness then?

No, not really. There was a little bit of – I got some very strange suggestions about what I should do from the – (coughs) pardon me – from the people I worked with. Like the advice was rather strange. But then my reasoning was that if it had been another member of the staff I would have been just as ignorant about it as they were and I might have been doing the same myself, so it didn’t worry me.

Have you noticed that some of the – your friends, or other people you know who have a mental illness – do they struggle with stigma? I mean, perhaps some people may? Or do you think there is some stigma for some people?

I think there’s a general stigma. It’s a fairly – mainly with media, I think. They’ll portray it in the wrong way.

Can you give us an example?

Well, people will go out of their way, if somebody commits a crime and has got a mental illness, they will actually put it in the paper that somebody’s got this mental illness. And I don’t like that, because – I mean, if they’ve got a sore big toe they don’t put that in the paper. (laughs)

And so how do you feel when you read something that’s not correct – – –?

Actually, I’m trying to bring it up at meetings of the Education group, because we usually, you know, write to them and tell them if we think we should.

And do you come across stories that are good stories in the media?

Oh yes, sometimes. Sometimes they’re really good, yes. Especially – yes.

Reg, just in summary, you’ve been talking about when you were young and when you perhaps had your illness when you were young –

Yes, and – – –.

– and you didn’t know what was happening.
That’s right.

And then, when you were forty, you had a diagnosis so that you knew what was happening.

Yes.

Did that make a difference to you, in understanding what had been happening?

It did make an enormous – because I did a lot of research at the time. As soon as I found out, had a diagnosis, I just kept on – I went to libraries and all sorts of things.

And did that actually help you manage with what was happening –

Yes.

– a lot better?

Yes, yes.

Do you think that might have also been a point when you started to get better, or –

Yes, I think so.

– not necessarily?

Yes. It was a relief to get a diagnosis.

To have an understanding of actually – – –.

An understanding of it, yes, yes.

Did you think, when you were younger, did you think it happened to everyone –

Yes.

– what your experience was?

Yes. I just – it didn’t worry me because I thought, ‘Oh, well, maybe other people have this experience, too.’

And, Reg, just coming back to the health system, or support workers, doctors.

Yes.

You’ve indicated that you had good doctors. Have you had a lot of different doctors throughout the time you’ve had the illness?
No. I’ve had good support from general practitioners, and I had to get a new psychiatrist because I lost the other one, but he’s okay as well. But I think, just in talking to lots of people around, there are some flaws in the mental health system, particularly funding in some ways. I think one of the things we should be able to aim at is that people who should – service providers – – –. (tape ends)

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A: TAPE 1 SIDE B

Reg, you’ve been talking about your experience with your illness and the mental health services. I’m wondering what sort of improvements would you like to see in the mental health service provision at this stage?

Well, I think that most people involved in the mental health service, whether they’re service providers or not, know what they ought to be doing. But the biggest problem we have is convincing the political people that we should have more resources. And I think what we ought to be aiming at is, instead of just somebody writing a book or something, or once again it gets shelved, I think we should have a very – what we really need is a very high profile lobbyist who can just keep it up all the time, instead of just having one go and then it gets shelved and a little while later you have another go. We need to push all the time, if we’re going to get proper funding and so forth.

And, Reg, I suppose your involvement with the Schizophrenia Fellowship – and I think it’s called the ‘Mental Illness Fellowship’ now –

Yes.

– that would be involved in that lobbying as well, wouldn’t it?

We are involved in lobbying, yes, but I still think we need a high profile person who could do it. Perhaps an ex-politician who’s got his mind in the right place, or something.

That’s something to work towards, Reg.

Yes. Yes.

Reg, can you think of the best and worst experience of your mental illness over the years?

Well, the worst experience is when I was having full-blown psychosis with auditory hallucinations, you have horrible voices and so forth. And, you know, people
criticizing you and calling you things that were completely out of character. And at one stage I was spending a lot of time ringing up police stations and reporting things that weren’t happening. And I was in Darwin. But I must give a tick to the Darwin police. They handled it very, very well. They were really good about it. And the worst experience of the whole lot was when I used to read about crimes in the paper and think that I’d committed them. That was a really horrible experience. And the best part about it, my mental health, is that I’ve joined the Fellowship and met lots and lots of nice people there, and become an educator and been able to give talks about my mental illness, and it keeps me well. I think that’s been really worthwhile.

Reg, thank you very much for your valuable contribution to our oral history project. Thank you.

Okay. Yes.

END OF INTERVIEW.