

Thursday, October 26, 2006 - Page updated at 12:00 AM

Guest columnist

I am not a scary person

By Ruth C. White
Special to The Times

This time in October, many people have long decided what they are going to wear, who they are going to be or how they are going to scare people, come Halloween, Oct. 31. Among the more popular "scary" characters are the mentally ill.



Ruth C. White

We are not "scary" people. Sometimes we may act strangely or unusually, as happens with many homeless people who are not being treated. But who wants to acknowledge that they are mentally ill when the public vision is of screaming people, incarcerated or hospitalized people, or violent people?

Most of us are hardworking people with families. We take our medications and see our therapists (expensive until mental-health parity begins in Washington state). We exercise and minimize stress and do other things that maintain our mental well-being.

I am a professor, researcher, author, kayaker, traveler and single mother of one. I have advanced degrees from top-tier universities. It is not easy to have a chronic illness, in my case bipolar disorder, and manage a successful life, but it is made more difficult when people stereotype and discriminate.

There was a time when I did not want to be "mentally ill," because I, too, had bought into the stereotype. As a mental-health professional, I should have known better.

The stigma manifested through bias, distrust, fear, embarrassment and stereotyping leads the mentally ill to avoid diagnosis and treatment, in order to avoid the stigma. We may also keep our illness a secret when an active support system is one of the ways we stay well. Lastly, stigma leads others to avoid living, socializing or working with, renting to, or employing people with mental disorders. This leads many of us to feel isolated and hopeless.

So this Halloween, let us make it a scary time without adding me, a mentally ill person, to your list of "scary people."

Ruth C. White is an assistant professor in the Social Work Program, Department of Anthropology, Sociology and Social Work, at Seattle University.