



Walkathon helps stamp out stigma of mental illness

BY MADELINE MONHEIT AND ELISABETH HAGEN

On Saturday morning, May 30, hundreds of people from all over the state will gather on the campus of Educational Testing Service in Lawrenceville to make a strong public statement against the stigma that continues to afflict persons affected by mental illness. By walking together in NAMI Mercer's second 5K walkathon, participants will send a loud message of support and hope to their friends and loved ones —YOU ARE NOT ALONE!

Although our society no longer warehouses patients in asylums, mental illness remains extremely isolating. In a recent *Parade Magazine* interview, actor Hugh Laurie (Fox TV's Dr. Gregory House), a vocal NAMI supporter who has spoken openly about his battle with depression, called mental illness "the last great taboo".

"People don't understand mental illness, says NAMI Mercer Executive Director Sally Osmer. "For many, it is like leprosy that they are afraid might be contagious." That's why public events such as the NAMI Mercer Walk are so important in correcting misconceptions and reducing the negative attitudes that surround mental illness.

According to Darlene Cronin, regional walk coordinator for the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), NAMIWalks is the largest mental health awareness program in the country. During the 2008/2009 walk season, there will be 80 walks in 45 states with 418 affiliates participating. For the second time, NAMI Mercer will host the event for the state of New Jersey.

Stigma brings a very personal pain to Osmer and her husband Rick. When their son developed symptoms of mental illness 15 years ago, they naturally expected to get support from friends and fellow parishioners in their caring community. "But this wasn't diabetes, cancer, or any other 'normal' illness," reflect Sally and Rick, both ordained ministers. "This was mental illness, and people began to pull away."

Although Sally has a master's degree in social work and her husband served as a chaplain in a mental hospital, their experience did not prepare the Osmers for dealing with mental illness in their own family. From time to time, people asked how things were going, but few reached out to their son. "Once, he was hospitalized for three weeks and no one visited him," sadly recalls Sally.

"Finding NAMI, taking the Family-to-Family course, knowing that we could call the Helpline, and most significantly, discovering that there were lots of other families in the community experiencing similar issues made a huge difference for us."

Unfortunately, misconceptions persist in spite of substantial scientific progress in the understanding and treatment of mental illness. "Today, mental illnesses are regarded as brain-based, biological disorders," states Dr. William Hayes, president of the NAMI Mercer Board of Directors and winner of the NAMI Exemplary Psychiatrist Award for 2008. First-hand experience with bipolar disorder and schizophrenia in his own family led Hayes to dedicate himself to fighting stigma and to providing compassionate care.

Although the National Institute of Mental Health reports that successful treatment of illnesses such as schizophrenia (60 percent), depression (70-80 percent), and panic disorder (70-90 percent) now surpass those of other medical conditions such as heart disease (45-50 percent), many persons with mental illness go untreated because of fear of disclosure and discrimination.

According to NAMI, about 57.7 million American adults experience a mental health disorder in a given year, but only 8 million seek help.

“People with mental illness suffer a triple whammy,” says Sally. “Their minds are disordered, their social network begins to collapse, and society as a whole turns away from them.” In addition, many people with mental disorders internalize society’s attitudes. “They feel less than worthy, and their illness becomes a shameful thing,” adds Sally.

The upcoming NAMIWalk will provide an excellent opportunity for local leaders in the public and private sectors to join the community in the fight against stigma. Janssen Pharmaceutica, a long-time NAMI supporter, recently hosted the Walk’s kickoff luncheon. ETS will host the May 30 event on the grounds of its headquarters. Each company has a representative on the NAMI Mercer Board and will have an enthusiastic employee walk team.

The upcoming walkathon also serves as one of NAMI Mercer’s chief sources of income. According to Jeremy Mann, who is co-chairing the NAMI Mercer Walk with Tom Tompkins, while the first objective is to make a statement against stigma, the second objective is to raise funds to sustain NAMI Mercer’s free programs and services.

“In 2007, we were successful in bringing more than 700 people together to support families affected by mental illness and in raising more than \$100,000,” continues Mann. This year, despite the economic downturn, we hope to do even better.” Thus far, corporate sponsorships and private donations to NAMIWalks around the nation have not diminished.

This year, NAMI Mercer’s presenting sponsor is Bristol-Myers Squibb. At this writing, the following corporations also have pledged support at multiple levels: PhRMA (Gold); Janssen Pharmaceutica (Silver); Roma Bank and the Carrier Clinic (Awards Reception); Capital Health and Catholic Charities (Supporter); and Hopewell Valley Community Bank (Kilometer).

By far, the largest portion of fundraising dollars, however, will come from individual donors. According to the Run Walk Ride Fundraising Council, charity athletic events are hugely successful (the top thirty brought in more than \$1.75 billion in 2008) because they depend on person-to-person giving. In her talk at the kickoff luncheon, Darlene Cronin emphasized: “People give to people.”

Walks also are unique in that everyone, regardless of age or economic status, can participate in a meaningful way. (Pets are welcome too.) The May 30 NAMIWalk is a great chance for the entire community to stand up for a worthy cause and experience, in the words of President Obama, “Hope in the face of difficulty. Hope in the face of uncertainty. The audacity of hope!”

To form a walk team, join a walk team, walk as an individual, or make a donation, go to www.namimercer.org or call (609) 799-8994.