

# GLEN COVE Record Pilot

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## Destigmatizing Emotional Diseases

By Dan Rosett

Over the past few months, much has been made of the movie *A Beautiful Mind* — both positive and negative. Its focus was on John Nash, who developed schizophrenia in college, which disabled him at various points in his life, and his ultimate success as a Nobel Prize winner in Economics.

Among the aspects touched on in this movie about brain disease, albeit in a Hollywood fashion, were prejudice against people who act differently, the range and severity of schizophrenia, the role of medication and therapy, and the many other complex facets that individuals and their families must confront daily.

In dealing with schizophrenia, the movie may yet prove its value in the discussions engendered and lessons learned, for years to come among the public, health professionals, and patients, of course.

### Breaking a Loud Silence

During school-age years, when youngsters are at their most vulnerable, impressionable and educable, programs are available to address mental health issues in elementary, middle, and high schools. One of the best is called "Breaking the Silence (BTS) — Teaching the Next Generation about Mental Illness." It is sponsored by NAMI, the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill, as part of their "Campaign to End Discrimination." It is a national effort to help people with mental illness to obtain the treatment, respect, understanding and economic opportunities they deserve.

"Schools have a vital role to play in countering cultural myths and media stereotypes, but when it comes to mental illness, many are not doing their job," states Janet Susin, Project Director of BTS and a teacher in Manhasset. Lorraine Kaplan and Louise Slater, with Ms. Susin, developed the curriculum.

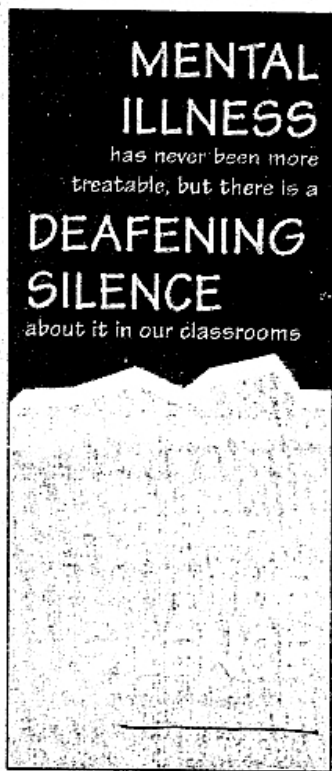
"Because of the shame and fear associated with mental illness, people still talk about it in whispers. Young people developing the early signs of illness — schizophrenia in particular — may hide their symptoms for years before getting help. Too often, the silence is deafening," she says.

Breaking the Silence was created to confront these misconceptions, promote tolerance toward people with mental illness, and encourage young people to get treatment early, Ms. Susin explains.

BTS has three primary goals: to fight the stigma of mental illness through educating the public that mental illness is a treatable disease of the brain; to confront discrimination through education and understanding; and to challenge negative stereotypes of people with mental illness as being dangerous, incapable, lazy, or evil and violent when, in reality, they are family members, friends, co-workers and neighbors.

### Wounding Words

Words wound deeply. Educators and health professionals urge avoiding such words as "psycho," "whacko," "schizo," "loony bin" and "nut house." They demean and degrade individuals with problems who may end up in hospitals that treat emotional disorders. Unfortunately,



Brochure cover to promote helpful school programs.

these words serve to reinforce some of the stereotypes seen on TV or in movies, or in schoolyards and backyards. Not using these kinds of words, and spelling out exactly what words should be used and how, are an important component of the BTS program at all levels.

The curricula also include excellent definitions and descriptions of the primary mental illnesses — schizophrenia, bipolar (manic-depressive disorder), major depression, panic disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder, borderline personality disorder, and phobias covered in the program at each academic level. The "human face" of emotional disease is also personalized by a listing of famous people who suffered from the various disorders.

### Other BTS Elements

At each school level, the program also provides age-appropriate exercises in thinking, emotions, and learning exercises. "Illustrative stories about real people struggling to deal with their own mental illness or one in their family help sensitize young people to the pain of mental illness and encourage empathy by putting a human face on the situations," commented Ms. Susin.

There are suggested activities such as writing letters or plays, designing art work and brochures, and research assignments. Posters and games that make specific points to meet BTS' curriculum goals make learning about these difficult brain diseases and issues meaningful and less threatening. Lists of the warning signs of mental illnesses contribute to the success of educating students at all ages.

### Teachers' Comments

Teachers who have used the program in their classes respond favorably to its impact.

"With knowledge comes compassion for people they might have ridiculed," noted Anna Eng, a health teacher in Manhasset.

"It's helped to de-stigmatize mental illness. Students speak more openly about issues affecting themselves, family and friends. With the aid of these lessons, the students have come to understand that mental illness can affect anyone and that there is hope and help," comments Jane Callaghan, a health teacher in the Great Neck schools.

"Breaking the Silence" is now used in many school districts. You can call your individual school to find out whether it is in use, or call NAMI at the number below. Many of the materials will be useful to parents as well.

### LICC - Another Unique Resource

Troubled teens and families have another unique resource in the region — the Long Island Crisis Center. Among their many services are a 24-hour, seven-day-a-week Hotline staffed by live volunteers (not answering machines); and a Suicide Outreach Team in which counselors place outreach calls to clients who have been assessed as being at-risk for harming themselves. According to Maureen Ferrante, MS, Community Educator for LICC, "We also have the nation's only online counseling program for information, referrals, and crisis counseling. The service is free, anonymous and confidential." Their number and web site are listed in the resources below.

### Information Resources

A large number of resources are now available by phone or the Internet. *Healthy Living Digest* offers its thanks to NAMI which has provided many of the most

- helpful and educational resources below:
- NAMI (National Alliance for the Mentally Ill) 800-950-3228 www.nami.org
  - Long Island Crisis Center Hotline: 516-679-1111 www.longislandcrisiscenter.org
  - National Depressive & Manic Depressive Association: 312-642-0049 www.namd.org
  - National Institute of Mental Health 301-443-3673 www.nimh.nih.gov
  - Anxiety Disorders Association of America 301-231-9350 www.adaa.org
  - Bazeelon Center for Mental Health Law 202-467-5730 www.bazeelon.org
  - The Carter Center 404-420-5100 www.cartercenter.org
  - Child and Adolescent Bipolar Foundation 847-256-8525 www.bpkids.com
  - NARSAD — National Alliance for Research on Schizophrenia & Depression 516-829-0091 www.narsad.org
  - National Mental Health Association 703-684-7722 www.nmha.org
  - National Mental Health Consumer Self-Help Clearinghouse 215-751-1810 www.nhselfhelp.org
  - Obsessive Compulsive Foundation 203-878-5669 www.ocfoundation.org
  - Treatment Advocacy Center 703-294-6001 www.psychiaws.org
  - American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry www.aacap.org
  - Internet Mental Health www.mental-health.com
  - Mental Health Infosource www.mh-source.com
  - Mental Health Net www.mentalhelp.net
  - Schizophrenia Home Page www.schizophrenia.com
  - National Stigma Clearinghouse http://community.webtv.net/stigmatnet