



March 24, 2006

Understand mental illness

By Ken Cerini

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Educating the public on mental illness is quite a challenge, but the National Alliance on Mental Illness, a grass-roots organization, continues on in its mission. Since 1979, NAMI has represented families of, and people with, serious mental illness, ranging from schizophrenia to depression, panic and bipolar disorders to Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. With more than 1,100 affiliates across the country and 58 of those in New York, NAMI reaches out nationally to millions of people. Here on Long Island, NAMI Queens/Nassau works hard encouraging schools to raise awareness about mental illness. "A major project for our NAMI chapter has been creating and promoting the use of our educational materials, 'Breaking the Silence: Teaching the Next Generation about Mental Illness.'

One out of 10 children under the age of 18 has a diagnosable mental illness that requires treatment, but of those, less than one in five gets treatment. It's vital that young people learn the warning signs of mental illness and that treatment is available. At the same time they also need to understand that mental illness is a real illness, just like diabetes and heart disease, and they shouldn't be ashamed to seek help," said Janet Susin, president of the organization.

What is NAMI's core mission and focus? NAMI provides support, education and advocacy for people with serious mental illness and their families. Our chapter offers professionally led support groups for families and friends with a mentally ill loved one who share experiences and learn how to cope with the many day-to-day challenges posed by mental illness. In this supportive environment, bonds are forged that ease the process of coming to terms with these life-altering brain disorders. Another special program, the Friendship Network, links people with mental illness with one another for the purpose of friendship and helps them break the isolation of their illness. We also have monthly meetings with guest speakers that educate our members and the public on many topics such as the latest in research and treatment, how to obtain benefits and available rehabilitation services. On the advocacy front, we educate our legislators on issues of special concern to our members. Whether it's the need for equitable insurance coverage, more housing or an end to abuse of our population in the criminal justice system, we get involved.

What is the ‘Breaking the Silence’ program and what is its intended effect on Long Island? Breaking the Silence(BTS) is a program of educational materials for upper elementary, middle school and high school that includes fully scripted story-based lessons, games, posters and cross-curricular activities that teach about mental illness. Although BTS started with our local affiliate, it is now a widely praised and successful national initiative. We’d love to see every school on Long Island use BTS to help children feel comfortable talking openly about their personal experience with mental illness and end some of the stigma connected with it. At the same time, we try to connect to all children and build a level of acceptance and understanding about this sensitive topic. We’re grateful that Friendly’s of Long Island has helped get the word out about BTS and mental illness by sponsoring our speaking at PTAs and libraries.

How can Long Islanders support the Breaking the Silence program? We encourage everyone to be familiar with what is being taught about mental illness in their schools and suggest to them that they use BTS. Teachers often don’t know how to approach this difficult topic in the classroom and are happy to learn about our materials. At the same time we’d like to see Long Islanders become proactive in fighting stigma wherever they see it. Individuals with mental illness are often portrayed negatively in the media, on television, in newspapers, etc. We urge everyone to take action and write letters, make phone calls, whatever is necessary to voice a complaint about a wrongful illustration of individuals with mental illness.

How can the program change children’s views on mental illness? Studies have shown that before the age of 10, children have learned, particularly from cartoons, to associate mental illness with evil. At the same time, kids are fair-minded. If we can get to them at an early age, we can counter stereotypes and misconceptions associated with mental illness. The onset of a mental illness can be very rough on a child or young adult, but tolerance can ease the pain. The support of friends is vital to an individual’s self-esteem and recovery. Mental illnesses are treatable and most people, if treated, can live normal, satisfying lives. It’s important that we get that message out to kids, that and the message of how important their support and friendship are.

How has the school response been to the Breaking the Silence program? Teachers consistently rate Breaking the Silence as effective or very effective in teaching about mental illness and dispelling myths and stereotypes. And we continue to receive orders from all around the country and beyond for our materials.

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Staff: 5 P/T

Annual Budget: \$270,000

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Program Services: 83.2 percent

