

NAMI reaches out with walkathon

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"Ever see the movie A Beautiful Mind? My home was a lot like that," Tucker said of his childhood. "My father was bipolar and he was a Korean War veteran," Tucker said in one breath, relating both the pride of a son and the pain of knowing his father spent years suffering with a brain disorder in a day when treatments were limited.

His father, Walt Tucker was medicated with tegritol, a drug normally used to treat seizures.

Decades ago, when his father was diagnosed, the primary drug for treating what was then called manic depression was lithium.

But his father couldn't take it, possibly due to lithium's often deleterious side-effects and ineffectiveness in regulating rapid mood swings.

The burden fell on Tucker's mother, Pearl, to manage the family and take care of her husband who suffered from a chronic, and at the time a virtually untreatable, illness.

Her situation was not unlike Alicia Larde Nash, wife of John Forbes Nash, Jr., the famous mathematician who was the main character in A Beautiful Mind and who suffered from schizophrenia.

"My mother really held the siblings together," Tucker said.

Tucker was one of nearly 2,000 who took part in NAMIWAKS New Jersey yesterday organized by NAMI (The National Alliance for the Mentally Ill), yesterday's walkathon in Westampton Township, Burlington County was one of 12 such walks nationwide.

"This is an opportunity for the entire mental health community of New Jersey to walk together -- to reach out to families, friends, colleagues, fellow workers, agencies, businesses and the community," NAMI New Jersey Executive Director Sylvia Axelrod said.

"... it will have a great impact in creating awareness and de-stigmatizing mental illness."

Many of the walkers were mental health consumers (people who suffer from a mental illness) and mental health professionals.

State Sen. Diane Allen kicked off the walk with a proclamation declaring that because: "the devastating effects of mental illness impact nearly 20 percent" of the population and "educating (the public) is vital ... for treatment" that the Senate recognizes the walk.

Several corporations were sponsors, including Bristol-Myers Squibb, Janssen Pharmaceutical, Yardville National Bank, Shop Rite, Mobil Corp., Nationwide Petroleum Realty, Inc. and The Trentonian.

Also offering their support were many of New Jersey's mental health suppliers, including University Behavioral Healthcare, Catholic Charities, Greater Trenton Behavioral Healthcare and Drenk Behavioral Health Center.

But by far the biggest contingent were the families, the caregivers who often have to bear the lion's share of responsibility in caring for the mentally ill.

They were there, not merely to gain support for their loved ones, but to root for those they claim have fought against and in many cases overcome mental illness -- an invisible but debilitating handicap which many in the general public continue to misunderstand.

"I'm really proud of him," Eileen Danielenko, vice president of NAMI FACE of Burlington County, said of a family member who has been coping with schizo-affective disorder for nearly 20 years.

"He's been dealt a lousy hand ... and he's been clean and sober now for 12 years," she said.

She bore a sign with an iris.

The iris, she explained, is an emblem for the mentally ill. Named after a painting by Vincent van Gogh, it reminds people that many great individuals, like van Gogh, have made tremendous contributions to society.

Many who walked yesterday say the battle these individuals suffer is exacerbated by the stigma which society places on mental illness.

"They don't want to be different," NAMI FACE President Paul Carroll said, explaining why it is so difficult to get people suffering from a brain disorder, or mental illness, into treatment.

"It prolongs their suffering," said Carroll, whose own son is now hospitalized.

His group, which included about 20 walkers, bore signs which said, "Stop the Stigma."

For Tucker the disparity between individuals who suffer from a brain disorder and those who have another type of illness hits very close to home.

"My daughter has Hodgkin's lymphoma," he said.

Thanks to the best of care she is now in remission.

He wonders, if his father were alive today, would he get the same support.