

The Record

His sister's suffering made him an activist

Tuesday, July 6, 2004

By TOM DAVIS

Chris Bosco calls it "giving back." And when it comes to helping the mentally ill, Bosco says there are no limits.

The Closter resident helped the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill's state chapter raise more than \$200,000 for its annual "walkathon" last year. When he mailed 120 letters that requested donations for the 2003 fund-raiser, 110 of the recipients agreed to contribute. He also brought in 56 people to participate in the annual event that promotes mental-illness causes.

"I reached out to friends, business associates, and I did it by basically telling my story," he said.

All that is a lot of work, Bosco admits. But his rationale is simple: When NAMI assisted him in finding help for his sister, Bosco considered that a turning point in his life. NAMI's educational programs, he says, helped him help his sister as she coped with psychosis. And if it weren't for NAMI, he says, he doesn't know where he'd be.

"I'll continue to give back. My motivation started as sincere gratitude for the help NAMI gave me and the ability they gave me to help my sister," he said.

Bosco is helping to put together this year's NAMI New Jersey walk, which will take place on Oct. 10 at Liberty State Park in Jersey City. The two-mile walk will raise awareness about mental illness - particularly the toll it takes on individuals and families.

People of all stripes - including politicians, advocates, and people with mental illness - are expected to participate. NAMI New Jersey, which has launched an all-out battle to wipe out stereotypes associated with mental illness, also is using the event to promote one of its most provocative slogans: "Freedom from stigma."

"In a world that is quite full of stigma, our walk is a breath of fresh air," said Kathleen Considine, a NAMI New Jersey walk coordinator.

That Bosco even turned to the outside for help was out of character for his family, he said. But it reflected the depths of his desperation when his sister first started to show symptoms of mental illness a decade ago.

His family was always very close, and if there was a problem, Bosco said, they always found a way to work it out. "This was the first time we couldn't do that," he said.

His sister was a high-functioning attorney who started to show signs when she became increasingly paranoid. "She felt people were talking about her," he said. "They were conspiring against her. We kind of dismissed it as workplace [stress]."

His family consulted psychiatrists, but that didn't help much.

Bosco said he would avoid his sister, and eventually he wrote her angry letters, telling her what kind of damage - he believed - she was doing to the family.

"She was doing things I didn't understand and nobody understood. Like most people, we just thought she needed to snap out of it," he said. "We would say all the time, 'You don't realize what you're doing!'"

His family eventually found a psychiatrist who recommended they contact NAMI. At the group's urging, Bosco then took a 12-week course that educated him on the nature of mental illness and suggested some practical ways of helping people to help their loved ones.

"It basically opened my eyes and educated me. They say knowledge is power. It truly is," he said. "It helped me understand. It helped me deal with the many conflicted feelings I deal with."

NAMI New Jersey ultimately saw that Bosco had the energy and the will to do more. To Bosco, raising money for the walkathon was the least he could do.

"If each one of us does a little bit, we can do a lot," he said.