

## The Record

# New Jerseyans walk off the stigma of mental illness

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It was just the drug they needed.

Sunny skies. Temperatures in the high 60s. Clowns, games, people wearing shorts and sitting on the grass in Liberty State Park.

And 4,000 people walking along the Hudson River, celebrating their fight against the stigma of mental illness.

Walking is a good way to heal, they said. Sure, at this Oct. 10 event, they raised money. But the two-mile walk, sponsored by the National Alliance for Mentally Ill's New Jersey chapter, was mostly to raise awareness.

Millions of people, organizers say, can't appreciate the sunshine the same way they can. And, they add, many people don't realize that mental illness has a face; sometimes, it even has a smile. Many could manage if they had better access to medication or health care.

This walk, organizers say, was for lawmakers and others who don't understand mental illness the same way they do cancer and pneumonia.

"Freedom from stigma is what we wanted to bring home," said Tara DiMilia, a spokeswoman for NAMI New Jersey. "It was appropriate to have the Statue of Liberty in the background."

It was the second annual walkathon of NAMI NJ. All year, it publicized the event and urged people to attend. This year, twice as many turned out as last year.

This year, like last, a variety of consumer groups, as well as psychiatric hospitals and several social service agencies, served as sponsors. During the opening ceremonies, U.S. Rep. Robert Menendez, D-Hudson, issued a call to end the stigma of mental illness.

Others, such as NAMI NJ President Mark Perrin, urged greater public understanding of mental illness as a brain disorder for which - like any physical problem - men, women and children are not personally responsible.

For those who walked, it was also a chance to not feel so alone.

There were participants who suffer from schizophrenia and depression. Others taking part have brothers, sisters, mothers and fathers who feel shut in and who can't care for themselves. Or they have loved ones who have had run-ins with the law and end up in jail without the right medication.

Among those taking part was Drew Horn, who has had a history of attempted suicides, homelessness and bipolar disorder. He did a comedy skit - something he does when he visits hospitals and entertains people with mental illness - and had people laughing. Laughter, he says, is what saved his life.

Chris Bosco of Closter led a 106-member group called "Team Hope," which walked the two-mile route.

Last year, he recruited mostly family and friends to participate. This year, he got co-workers and elected officials to join him.

"I just asked them to do it. I didn't have to twist anybody's arm," said Bosco, whose sister has suffered from mental illness. "You let them know what you're doing, and they do it."

Along the route, walkers chanted "Mental illness can be cured" in Spanish, and asked the crowd, "Who loves NAMI?" Many, in English, replied, "Hudson County," or other locations.

Adults and children did face paintings, danced with a clown on stilts and heard music from the Lost Highway Ramblers. Others handed out water or participated in any way they could.

"There was one woman who wanted to walk but couldn't," Bosco said. "She asked, 'How can I help?' I said, 'By being here, you help.' She ended up handing out water."

For many caregivers who work around the clock to care for people with mental illness, walking was a chance to go outside and be themselves. It was an escape, a release.

Martha Silva, who heads NAMI's efforts in Hudson County and in the Hispanic community, has a mother and son who both suffer from bipolar disorder. Being with people who share the same experiences, she said, comforted her.

"The day was just gorgeous. It was a day where you forgot about the illnesses," she said. "This is a time where you don't feel alone. We have at least one thing in common."