

BEAUTIFUL MINDS

A PARENT'S NIGHTMARE

By STEPHEN ROW
Staff Writer

Kathleen's story began during her daughter's freshman year at college in 1991 in Storrs, Conn.

She may have ignored the early signs, like the fact that her daughter, Amy, was isolating from her friends during her senior year in high school.

She also expressed a fear about going away to school because she was disturbed about the recent death of her maternal grandfather who passed away Aug. 20 of that year.

It was while she was away at college, however, that the bizarre behavior started.

It began with strange sleep patterns, accompanied with bouts of mania where she was doing "six or seven mile runs in the middle of the night," Kathleen said.

Amy started drinking that year, not an unusual occurrence for a college freshman. What was strange was her reaction to hangovers.

"She said, 'Being hung over is the most comfortable way I feel all week.'"

Amy made it through her freshman year, though the experience was "really frightening" for her mother.

When Amy arrived home that summer, it was obvious something was wrong.

She managed to hold down a job selling ice cream at a park, but when she was not busy at her job her "moods were weird" her mother remembers.

"It was like we had landed on the planet Krypton," she said, remembering the episodes where one minute Amy was screaming at her then spending hours or even days lying in bed.

One day Kathleen was browsing through a local library when she came across a book by Mary Ellen Walsh about families dealing with mental illness.

The author's words seemed to be telling her story.

"That's when I said to myself, 'My God, my daughter has a mental illness,'" she recalled.

For Kathleen the realization was devastating.

"I can remember screaming in the car," she said, describing her experience as one of grief and "over-

Mother recalls daughter's battle



Trentonian Photo/BOB CASTELLI

NAMI NJ consumer outreach liaisons Jay Yudof and Kathleen Considine.

whelming loss."

Like many parents, Kathleen's frustration was compounded by well-meaning family members who would minimize the severity of Amy's condition.

"She's just going through a phase," she remembered one grandparent telling her.

By the end of the summer her daughter agreed to see a psychiatrist. The doctor prescribed Ativan to relax.

The effect of the sedative on Amy was acute. It not only relaxed her; it put her into a virtual catatonic state.

"I called the doctor and said, 'The body lying on the bed in my daugh-

ter's room is not my daughter,'" Kathleen remembers saying.

Amy was admitted to a hospital where a psychiatrist advised the family that their daughter would be "OK in six months."

Unfortunately the doctor's prognosis was far from reality.

During her stay, Amy became "floridly psychotic" her mother remembers, having "visions of Satan and God."

It was then that Kathleen ran into problems with the managed care system.

"Our insurance ran out," she said. Kathleen recalls running "down to the billing office" with her husband where an insensitive clerk told

**ABOUT
THIS
SERIES:**

To date, this week's series have chronicled the lives of "consumers," those who suffer from mental illness.

Today, the seventh day in our series, our stories deal with two parents. Their stories are typical of many who have devoted decades of care for loved ones who are afflicted with a mental illness.

Often the mentally ill individual would not have received the treatment they needed without the love and energy given to them by such devoted and loving parents.

them, "Your daughter will be in and out of hospitals for the rest of her life."

What followed was a string of hospitalizations, "some good, some of which were heinous," Kathleen said.

Amy didn't respond well to medication and in the end she agreed to undergo electroshock therapy.

Amy now lives in the Boston area where she works for a managed care company.

"I just couldn't be more proud of her," Kathleen said of her daughter.

Her mother's story, interestingly, picks up where her daughter's leaves off. Kathleen was so moved by the paucity of help offered families of consumers in the area of mental health that she decided to return to school and get her master's degree in social work.

The condition of "family therapy can be horrible," she said, remembering the fresh memories of hospitals, inept hospital clerks and insensitive doctors.

Her daughter teases her about her new line of work.

"Isn't it nice I gave you a second career," she said.

— Kathleen Considine now works as a consultant for the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill in New Jersey. She can be reached through NAMI NJ's offices at (732) 940-0991.