

BEAUTIFUL MINDS

HELPING THOSE IN NEED

By **TONY PERSICILLI**
Staff Writer

LAWRENCE — Rachel Howard has always been involved in helping people.

A social worker by training, she has worked for the federal government and as a mental health services provider.

Last year, a job-transfer for her husband landed her in Mercer County.

At that same time, the Mercer County Affiliate of the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill was looking to provide professional leadership to help reach more people.

NAMI Mercer chose Howard.

It was a perfect match.

"I guess I was in the right place at the right time," Howard said.

"I know the business side of mental health. I knew about NAMI and thought this would be a wonderful opportunity," she added, commending the leadership which preceded her appointment in July.

"A lot of our success is because of the work of Chomy Garces, who was the executive director before me," said Howard, who pointed out that under Garces' leadership NAMI Mercer was named NAMI Affiliate of the Year.

The largest of the 21 affiliates in New Jersey, NAMI Mercer now counts more than 435 households as members.

The more than 30 volunteers provide those families and any others who seek help with education about mental illness, offer support to people who suffer from mental illness and their family members and direct them to various groups or organizations that may help them.

"A while ago," Howard said, "we realized that the need for services was growing ... and that we had to grow with it."

"We're looking to grow. We're

Agency provides professional leadership



Trentonian Photo/BOB CASTELLI
Rachel Howard was appointed executive director of Mercer NAMI in July.

looking to meet the needs of the people we serve and reach out to serve more people."

Which is why NAMI Mercer offers such programs and services as Peer Advocacy for

Families; educational classes in the community for families and caregivers, information and referral, support groups, and assistance for people to negotiate the complex mental health

system for their family member who suffers from mental illness.

But these programs cost money and, like all service organizations, NAMI Mercer is underfunded.

"It costs more (to run) than we have," said Howard, who pointed out that, besides a two-year \$10,000 per-year-grant from Mercer County, NAMI Mercer relies "exclusively on the community for support."

For that reason, NAMI Mercer is holding a fund-raiser in January.

A "Night Out with NAMI" will feature Dr. Richard Kogan performing the music of Robert Schumann. It will be a musical exploration of the connection between Schumann's manic depression and his creative genius.

The concert will begin at 3 p.m. in the Music Building at The College of New Jersey. A cocktail reception and dinner will follow.

For further information, please call NAMI Mercer at (609) 777-9766.

ABOUT THIS SERIES:

In an effort to raise awareness about mental illness The Trentonian is publishing several articles during Mental Illness Awareness Week which began Sunday.

Today's article is the sixth in an eight-part series chronicling the lives of individuals and families who have battled mental illness.

While their stories have tragic elements, they are also heroic, as these individuals have overcome social stigma, personal denial and the complicated labyrinth of the medical profession and the ever-changing laws which define what is and isn't a disease.

Man's transformation takes decades

By **LAURA PELNER**
Staff Writer

When Tom was in his teens he thought it was cool to be the crazy guy and the life of the party.

It wasn't until he got older that he realized not everyone was driven by voices they heard in their heads.

Tom Curry, a 47-year-old schizophrenic, remembers poking fun at his illness when he was younger and trying to play up some of its characteristics. He enjoyed partying and getting attention from his friends.

But that was a long time ago and Curry, who was diagnosed at age 17, has completely changed his outlook since then.

"It was a rude awakening for me, something I didn't want to admit to," Curry said of one of the first times he realized he was suffering from an illness.

"The voices started as far back as I can remember," he explained. "When they became all-consuming I dropped out of college."

And of the jokes he used to say about himself, well, Curry says, he didn't really mean them.

"Looking back, I was really making fun of the illness in general," he says, adding that after he realized he was sick he no longer wanted to

stand out.

Like many, Curry denied he had an illness for years. He reasoned that he wasn't sick because his schizophrenia wasn't constant — he had stable periods and wasn't always out of control.

But when he was acting wildly, Curry went all out, using drugs and alcohol, not taking the medicines designed to control his schizophrenia and being put in and out of hospitals.

It was after these times he felt the sheer power of schizophrenia and what it was doing to him. During these low points he said he frequently felt depressed.

"When you suffer from depression, it's in recovery when I realize what I've lost."

Curry admits to ignoring the advice of friends and family, who tried to encourage his healing and ultimately save him from himself.

But, Curry says, he couldn't accept this until he was ready.

"It's an everyday process, this healing," he said. "It's sometimes minute to minute and second to second. It was a rude awakening for me, something I didn't want to admit to."

"Recovery is tough. I'm sure that's why so few really get it."

Another deterrent is the public's perception of the mentally ill, which Curry said is really damaging to those who suffer from the disease. That's why he's sharing his story.

He said he used to feel afraid to go out in public because he thought people could tell by looking at him that he was schizophrenic.

"Years ago, when I had just gotten out of Trenton Psychiatric Hospital, I was going shopping with my wife and I thought all eyes were on me," he remembers.

"We want better treatment. We are not our illness, we are just people afflicted with it."

Curry describes his last hospitalization, which was about a year and a half ago, as an "eye opener."

"I was homeless for a while," he remembers sadly. "But, through family support I'm back on track."

He credits a large part of his successful recovery to his wife, to whom he's been married for more than 20 years. Her support and the fact that she stayed by his side got him through many hard times, he said.

But it wasn't always like that. Sometimes Curry felt his wife was a hindrance.

"At the times (when she used to try to pull me out and make me better) she's the bad guy whose trying

to take crazy Tom away," he said.

In addition to assistance from his family and friends, Curry credits the pharmaceutical companies with aiding in his recovery. Their new drugs helped turn his life around, he said.

"I went through so many medications," he says. "Some of the new medications have opened my eyes."

"My healing was made possible through a combination of family support, maturity — which came on way late — education, medication and my willingness."

CLARIFICATION

The Trentonian yesterday printed a quote from the Chemically Addicted Coordinator for the Mental Health Association in New Jersey not intended for publication. Marie Verna, Director of Consumer Advocacy for MHANJ states:

"MHANJ did not mean to imply or suggest that consumers who are dissatisfied with their doctors' knowledge of substance abuse treatment should 'Fire their asses.' However, we do acknowledge that consumer empowerment is often based on choice. For many consumers, when they realize that they deserve the best treatment possible and they have the choice to seek that treatment, their road to recovery begins."

Getting patients proper treatment

In 1900, Clifford Beers, a Yale graduate and young businessman, suffered a breakdown brought on by the illness and death of his younger brother.

After a suicide attempt, Beers was hospitalized in private mental institutions.

The deplorable care and conditions that Beers endured during his stay in various institutions led to his writing "A Mind That Found Itself." The book helped spread his message of mental health-care reform and led to the formation of the Connecticut Society for Mental Hygiene.

The Connecticut Society became the National Committee for Mental Hygiene and, in 1950, merged with the National Mental Health Foundation and the Psychiatric Foundation to form the National Association of Mental Health, which, in 1979, became the National Mental Health Association.

There are now 340 NMHA affiliates nationwide, including one in New Jersey.

"In 1948," said Carolyn Beauchamp, executive director of the Mental Health Association of New Jersey, "the Mental Hygiene Society of New Jersey was formed. We joined the (NMHA) in 1955 and now we have affiliates in 12 counties."

The MHANJ also has a history of success having won several national awards for its services and programs.

"Initially," Beauchamp said, "the focus was on state hospitals. On how to get the right treatment and still protect the consumer's rights."

"Then, it shifted to community alternatives, day care programs, partial care programs, finding the consumers employment, finding them housing."

"Because we're an advocacy group, we try to steer consumers and their families to the right organization for their particular needs."

The NMHA continues to strive to fulfill Beers' goals, spreading tolerance and awareness, improving mental health services, preventing mental illness and promoting mental health.

The Mental Health Association of New Jersey can be reached at (973)571-4100.

— TONY PERSICILLI

NAMI NJ fosters community awareness

The National Alliance for the Mentally Ill New Jersey was founded in 1985 as the New Jersey Alliance for the Mentally Ill.

The goal of the organization was to pull together and expand the effectiveness of local and county-based family support self-help groups into a statewide alliance of advocacy and support groups for families of persons who have mental illness in the state of New Jersey.

All of the founding members had loved ones who suffered from severe mental illnesses such as schizophrenia and manic depression.

In 1985, the newer atypical psychotropic medications had not been developed and community mental health services were not addressing the needs of the most severely ill individuals.

"While families generally assumed the major long-term caretaking role," said Sylvia Axelrod, the executive director of NAMI NJ, "they were often excluded from providing input into treatment planning."

"Families found themselves stigmatized, blamed, ignored and powerless."

Built on the dedication of family member volunteers such as founding member and former President Marilyn Goldstein, NAMI NJ now has local affiliate self-help support and advocacy groups in each county.

There has been a major growth of the organization's membership base and increased recognition of the "family empowerment movement."

NAMI NJ fosters community awareness to fight the stigma and discrimination against persons with mental illness including the passage of the New Jersey Mental Health Insurance Parity Act and the Family Support for Persons with Serious Mental Illness Act.

It also has developed the Expressive Arts Network, Multi-Cultural Outreach and Law Enforcement Education Programs and provided representation and leadership on numerous mental health advisory committees, coalitions, task forces and forums that foster advocacy for improved treatment and quality of life for persons with serious mental illness.

NAMI NJ can be reached at (732) 940-0991.

— TONY PERSICILLI