

PRAISE THE LORD

Man thanks God for depression

By LAURA PELNER
Staff Writer

Angelo Andreatos thanks God for giving him a mental illness — severe depression.

"Without it, I wouldn't know who I am today," the 36-year-old says as he explains what it's like to live with a disease that encompasses his life.

"I'm proud of myself today," he said, adding that a year and a half ago he would have been unable to say such a thing. "I'm proud to know me today."

For years Andreatos has grappled with depression and different anxiety disorders like obsessive-compulsive. He's gone off and on medications and almost lost himself on the way.

He describes his road to recovery as long and winding and his disease as debilitating.

"You're talking about an illness where you lose everything," he said. "(But), the more you lose, the more you appreciate."

And looking back, Andreatos realizes he has a lot to appreciate.

As a child, Andreatos said he remembers always feeling guilty. As he aged, it became almost impossible for him to deal with that guilt and his daily routine.

He found it hard to understand what his mind and body were going through and it was equally tough for family and friends.

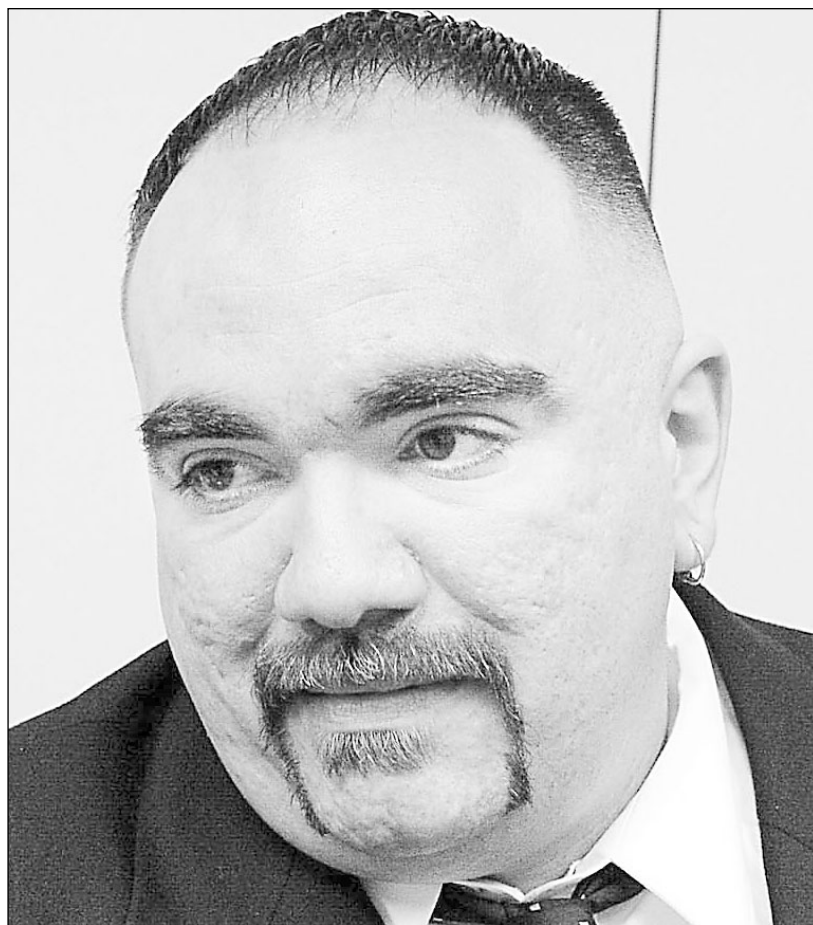
"I was always Angelo the nice guy," he recalls. "But once I started shutting down, (my family) only saw that. To them I was a new Angelo, one they didn't want to be around."

So, like so many who deal with mental illness, Andreatos ran. He stopped working, ended relationships and eventually had to move back home.

At that time, he was stuck. He remembers thinking of the word "work" as "dirty," but unemployment was just as bad.

"There was no such thing as unemployment," he jokes. "Unemployment was for total losers. And welfare? Forget about it. I couldn't tell my family."

But for every one of these bad



Angelo Andreatos says he wouldn't know who he is had he not suffered from severe depression.

memories, Andreatos throws out something positive, like the fact that last month he completed his first full year of work after not working for 13 years.

This ability to be positive and joke about himself, helps Andreatos remain upbeat.

By his own admission, Andreatos likes to have a different "slide" on life. A chuckle, he says, goes miles.

"Humor is saving my life; it's one of my best tools."

As Andreatos speaks, it becomes

clear he weaves humor into his life almost subconsciously. Even when he's explaining some of the graver aspects of his illness, like the bias some people and institutions have about the mentally ill, he cracks a joke.

He tells a story about how he felt after being denied life insurance by a major provider because of his depression.

"They accept everyone," he jokes. "I think they even insure dogs."

When you first meet him,

Andreatos tells you not to look at his feet because he's colorblind and sometimes his socks don't match.

"Who can tell the difference between navy and black?" he asks with a sheepish smile.

Andreatos uses such comments as an icebreaker. But they serve another purpose, too — to show a different side of this man, one that goes beyond depression.

What's harder than coping with a mental illness, he says, is dealing with the other physical ailments that come up.

For Andreatos it's asthma, so in addition to taking four pills a day to treat depression he also uses an inhaler and takes an antihistamine.

This brings up worries about the medicines he takes and possible drug interactions. But instead of obsessing, Andreatos tries to live his life.

"What a pebble would have knocked me down before would take a boulder now," he says.

This philosophy, and his story of healing, is something Andreatos is eager to share. As a mental health advocate and leader of two support groups he helped found, his life is full of ways to help others.

He gains strength from hearing people say he makes a difference and remembers one incident in particular.

Someone from the depression and bipolar group Andreatos created decided to start their own group and used him and what he had done as a model.

"I felt like a pregnant father," he said.

And now that it's clear Andreatos is in control and his life is on an upswing, the man who used to be a prisoner to his illness is able to govern it.

Which is exactly what he wants. "If I (have to) to respect the illness," he says, "I'll be damned sure the illness respects me too."

Concluding series on mental health

Today's articles conclude *The Trentonian's* eight-part series on mental health during Mental Illness Awareness Week.

It is our hope that this series has raised some awareness in a difficult and ever-changing field. Trying to understand mental illness is a daunting task unless an individual or someone they love has been afflicted.

It is literally as difficult as trying to "get into someone else's head."

We at *The Trentonian* hope our readers have been able to relate to some of these stories and in some small way gain a better understanding of a field which has often been clouded by myth, misunderstanding and stigma.

Compared to other disciplines, the entire field of mental health is still in its infancy. However, with recent breakthroughs in brain research — particularly with the use of magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), genetic mapping and the discovery of neurotransmitters — neuro-physiologists have been able to make great strides in this field.

Maybe someday science will be able to look into a person's head and see and hear what they experience, but until then, people will have to rely on the subjective testimony of those who are brave enough to come forward and talk about their own experiences.

Hence, *The Trentonian* wishes to thank the individuals who were willing to share their own experiences with mental illness. It also wishes to thank NAMI and MHANJ for their help in making this series possible.

I personally am no stranger to the field of mental illness. My own experience I have chosen not to share at this time, as I feel it is not my place nor is it appropriate in my capacity as a member of the editorial staff of *The Trentonian*.

I can say, however, that I have been able in a personal way to appreciate the sharing of those who came forward to speak with me and with our reporters about their own lives.

I am also grateful to *The Trentonian* staff who took the time to listen to these individuals and try to put their thoughts down on paper. It is not easy to portray a person's mental battles in 500 to 600 hundred words.

As recently as two years ago, a House subcommittee listened to testimony from a physician who asserted that mental illness was a myth. According to NAMI's website, www.NAMI.org, claiming to represent the American Academy of Neurologists, Dr. Fred Baughman called mental illness "a neuro-biological lie" and psychiatry a "fraud ... as a profession."

Thanks to NAMI's efforts, those claims are being refuted on Capitol Hill, but the very fact that they had an ear among the nation's leaders demonstrates how far the field has to go in convincing others that mental illness is not a myth.

The statistics are clear enough. According to NAMI, over 25 percent of hospital admissions in 1998 were for psychiatric reasons. Sixteen percent of prison inmates have reported a mental illness.

The total cost of mental health services in the U.S. in 1990 was \$148 billion, \$69 billion for health-care and \$79 billion in lost productivity or disability compensation.

— STEPHEN ROW

Clinical depression more than a weakness

By TONY PERSICILLI
Staff Writer

WESTAMPTON — Clinical depression is more than having a bad day or dealing with a loss such as the death of a loved one.

It also is not a personal weakness nor a character flaw.

It is a brain disorder that affects the whole person. It affects the way a person feels and acts.

And it almost cost Brian his arm.

"I was a machine operator," said the 39-year-old Yankees fan, "and, one day, at work I just got so depressed I couldn't move."

"At the last second, I pulled my arm out of the way of the machine I was working on. If I hadn't, my arm would have been cut off."

That was 18 months ago.

"It's not so bad now," he said, "but sometimes I'll be walking down the hall and I'll just stop and stare at the floor — for a long

time.

"That's not right."

The indecision and lack of concentration that Brian experienced that day in the machine shop and still experiences in the hallway are common signs of depression as are persistent sadness and hopelessness, increased irritability or agitation as well as low energy, lack of enthusiasm or motivation.

All of which Brian suffered from.

"After (the near accident), they took me to the hospital," Brian said, "where they said I have manic depression and anxiety."

"I stayed in the hospital for a while and then they shipped me to Ancora and these people rescued me."

Diana Pasca, the coordinator of vocational services/community relations for Delaware House is one of the people who helped "rescue" Brian.

"I'm sure he probably feels that

way," Pasca said, "but what we do here is provide them with the opportunity to learn how to cope with everyday life."

The programs at the Delaware House — which include vocational services, substance abuse treatment and residential care — are for adults who have experienced mental illness and are in need of psychiatric treatment and rehabilitation.

"Apparently I've had this for a while," Brian said. "I probably had it as a kid but I'm just learning how to cope with it now."

Brian is at the Delaware House every day, participating in group therapy sessions.

"I've been here about four months," he said. "I'm learning how to cope with the daily problems of life."

"Things like washing the dishes, taking out the garbage. They're little things and the kind of things most people take for granted but they're the kinds of

things someone with depression and anxiety have trouble dealing with."

Fortunately for Brian, the prognosis for depression is good and, once diagnosed, 80 percent of clinically depressed individuals can be effectively treated with psychotherapy and medication, which Brian has monitored by the Delaware House.

"I'm still on a lot of medication," he said. "I still get depressed, but not like before. On my own, I don't know if I'll ever be able to function like a normal person."

"But here, they teach you that, even though you may never be cured, you can learn how to control your illness, with medication, with therapy."

And Brian is learning. "They give you all kinds of help and support here but you have to want to help yourself."

"I'm a totally different person than I was before I came here. I can't thank them enough."