

Eric Arauz

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Hopeful Case

Advocate is anxious to tell story of his mental illness



Story by **ROBIN GABY FISHER** / Photo by **JERRY McCREA**

Eric Arauz's rendezvous with madness began in the sixth grade, when his father tried to run him down in the school parking lot.

Thirteen years later, insanity came calling again. By then, Arauz was grown, married, a veteran of the first Gulf War with a big IQ and college ambitions. His father, a highly educated, once prosperous businessman had succumbed to his mental demons and died the previous summer at a halfway house in the Palisades.

This time, the demons had come for the son.

Arauz had separated from his wife and was distraught over the loss of his marriage, his stepdaughter, family life. The confluence of his depression and anxiety had sent him into a manic spin.

"In 1995, I woke up in a maximum-security mental hospital in New Jersey, shackled to a bed in four-point restraints," said Arauz, of North Brunswick, speaking on behalf of the National Alliance of Mental Illness to a group of Somerset County business professionals. "My father had just died of the same thing. I thought my life was over."

What makes this man's story different from so many others published in newspapers or splashed across the airwaves is that Arauz not only survived his mental illness -- even though doctors said he was a hopeless case -- but he is using it to reach out to others.

"I am not successful in spite of my mental illness," Arauz told his Somerset County audience earlier this month. "I am successful because of it."

Of his first of three hospitalizations in a maximum-security institution, Arauz remembers that the mattress was on the floor and the room was painted clinical white, the same color as the uniform worn by the attendant standing over him. His wrists were raw from the restraints, and he didn't know where he was or how he had gotten there. He screamed for his mother, but heard no sound.

"Good morning, Patient Number One," the attendant said in a Haitian accent. "Please do not be alarmed by the restraints. You have had a manic episode. You are bipolar, alcoholic and drug-addicted."

Later, this pessimistic prognosis by the attending psychiatrist: "Untreatable."

Eight years have passed since the last time Arauz was held captive by his mental illness; 11 since he took his last drink or abused psychoactive drugs. Since then, he graduated with high honors from Rutgers University and earned a master's degree from Rutgers' School of Management and Labor Relations. He is married again, happily. "I am a good family member," he says.

If Arauz's disease is not uncommon -- an estimated 5.4 percent of Americans have a mental illness, and many use drugs and alcohol to try to blunt their symptoms -- his recovery is encouraging.

But it is his passion for sharing his story and his honest telling of it that have made him an overnight phenomenon in the mental health world.

"Eric is amazing," says Jill Zwick of the New Jersey chapter of the National Alliance of Mental Illness. "He is able to reach audiences the way few people can. He connects to people because he's so open and honest about his life."

In demand

Arauz, 38, first came to the attention of the National Alliance for Mental Illness last year, according to Zwick, the state coordinator and trainer.

"It's interesting," she says. "We get referrals for speakers. He actually sent a resume. He took the training, and he's been with us ever since."

Today, Arauz is in demand. He also represents the National Council on Alcohol and Drug Dependency, the New Jersey Citizen Advisory Board of the Division of Addiction Services and the smoking cessation program "Choices."

His recent speaking engagements have included the Substance Abuse Mental Health Service Association in Washington, D.C., the Rally for Recovery at Liberty State Park and the Buffalo Psychiatric Center.

Arauz begins every talk with his biography. His manner is animated and his sense of humor is self-deprecating. He talks about his father's untreated mental illness; his bout with childhood obesity; fighting the war in Iraq; losing his father; his first hospitalization; alcoholism, drug addiction; divorce; a benevolent mother; the death of a loving stepfather; the decision to get better; a shaky recovery; a new marriage; a new focus -- and, now, a new life.

Arauz's goal in speaking out is twofold: giving hope to people who feel as hopeless as he once did and fighting the stigma of mental illness wherever he finds it.

Rutgers history professor Jackson Lears says Arauz is the right man for the job: "He's one of the best students I've ever had. Though he was not as polished as students from more conventional backgrounds, he was more engaged. He spoke and wrote from the heart, as well as the mind."

Robert Perez has been friends with Arauz since the second grade. "Eric knows what he wants to do and he's doing it," Perez says. "A lot of people think they can't do anything about a mental illness, but him telling his story shows them they can do it. He has a great passion for this and a great deal of empathy for people. He knows what they're going through and how they can be helped."

Perez witnessed his friend's first manic episode in 1995. "Eric had come to visit me in Texas," says Perez, who still lives in Dallas. "He was having trouble in his (first) marriage. He had always been a talker and outgoing, but that time he wouldn't stop talking. When I realized he hadn't slept for three straight days, I knew there was a problem."

After 10 days, Perez put Arauz on a plane home to New Jersey. His mother arranged for a bed in a local psychiatric hospital. Later, he was admitted to the psychiatric unit of the local Veterans Administration hospital -- the place where he awakened, strapped down in the bed, with the Haitian attendant at his side.

"There are many people that have gone on to lead tremendously productive lives with these disorders," Arauz remembers the attendant saying. "If you can remain clean and sober and compliant to your medications, your life can be fine. As a matter of fact, Beethoven and Van Gogh were mentally ill."

Arauz thought, "But I don't paint and I don't play the piano!"

It was one of the lowest points of his life, he says.



Photo by AMANDA BROWN

Willing to travel

Arauz is as comfortable addressing business and mental health professionals as he is patients with mental illnesses, but his calling is encouraging people who are stuck where he was.

"Existing on the absolute fringes of society," he says. "Helpless. Hopeless. It's 8 a.m. and you don't know how you can live like this until 9. Feeling shame and 'otherness' and wondering, 'Who is this person I've turned into?'"

So he travels to psychiatric hospitals around the state, and just about any place he is asked, for the chance to share his experience. The pay is modest, but the reward is plenty -- a nod of acknowledgment or a glint of hope in a patient's eyes.

At Ancora Psychiatric Hospital in Hammonton, a man who had been institutionalized for 13 years for killing someone while in a psychotic state approached Arauz in tears to say, "Thanks."

"He said he didn't see how he could keep going, but heard in my story someone who was as low as he was and fought back," Arauz says. "He hugged me and kept telling me to spread the hope. I went to my car and cried."

After speaking in St. Louis, Arauz says, "a man came up to me, weeping. His son had been killed by police during a manic episode. He and his wife told me stories about their son for hours."

Arauz spent 10 days recently speaking to both patients and staff at Greystone Psychiatric Hospital in Parsippany. Next week, he is scheduled to speak at the state's Division of Addiction Services.

With his own mental illness in remission, he is living his best life, Arauz says.

A wife's support

Arauz met his second wife, Cheryl, in 1996 on the Rutgers campus in New Brunswick. They began dating the next year and married on June 2, 2000. "She's the woman of my dreams," Arauz says.

Cheryl supported her husband through his last manic episode, eight years ago.

"I remember it wasn't Eric," Cheryl says. "He was saying outlandish things, and I could tell he wasn't present with me. He was very different."

Arauz had stopped taking his medication, thinking, like so many people with bipolar disorder, that he didn't need it any longer.

"I knew once he started taking his medication again, it would be okay," Cheryl says.

He did and it was.

"At this time of his life, Eric seems very confident, very driven, and he really likes where he is," Cheryl says. "It's a good time for us."

In some ways, theirs is a classic story of opposites attracting. He's big; she's small. He's gregarious; she's quiet. He's a marathon cyclist; she's a marathon runner.

Their interests merge at weekend yoga classes. Arauz, his wife and his mother have made it a Sunday morning ritual, and he attends another three sessions during the week. After that is family time -- his and hers. "Everything is about family," Arauz says.

The couple is expecting their first child in March.

The Arauz home is a townhouse in North Brunswick. The decor is an eclectic mix of sports paraphernalia (a Giant road cycling bike and a Specialized Stump Jumper mountain bike -- his; running shoes and softball equipment -- hers), family photographs, and mementos from Arauz's Navy travels: a collection of Buddhas, a brass plate from Egypt, carved Asian temple dogs -- symbols, Arauz says, of protection and prosperity.

"We love being home," Arauz says. "It's a peaceful place."

If Arauz has learned anything from his battle with mental illness, he says, it is that serenity is a gift, not a promise.

"I live at the whim of two diseases," Arauz says. "Bipolar and addiction. There's no guarantee that the treatment won't stop working tomorrow. If I crash, I crash, but at least I tried. And, hopefully, I helped a few people along the way."