

## Reinterpreting life after mental illness

E. Brunswick man will chair ‘Step Forward for Our Heroes’ walk on May 12

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In 1995, in the middle of a manic episode and a divorce from his first wife, Eric Arauz found himself sitting in Chicago O’Hare International Airport.

Shirtless in just jeans and a blazer, he cried as he read the scrolling Teletype screen with messages he believed were addressed to him alone. Then, eight of the Windy City’s finest tackled him to the ground and put him on a flight to Newark.

“I was institutionalized off this couch,” said Arauz, who was diagnosed with bipolar disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder and alcoholism, pointing to the sofa where he sat on a recent Friday morning in East Brunswick.

Last week took the 42-year-old all over the state, from training staff at the Harbor House mental illness facility in Paterson to talking to government workers in Burlington to delivering a speech titled “How to Come Alive and Change Your Life” in drug court.

He runs his own company, Arauz Inspirational Enterprises, earned a master’s degree in labor relations management, has won numerous national awards for his work on trauma, recovery and behavioral health, and he currently holds a faculty appointment in UMDNJ’s psychiatry department as an adjunct instructor.

As a veteran of the U.S. Navy who served in Operation Desert Shield, he will also chair the New Jersey chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) “Step Forward for Our Heroes” walk on May 12 at the Seaside Park boardwalk.

The Eric Arauz of 2012 might bear little resemblance to the one of 17 years ago, but for Arauz himself, it’s important to remember that they are both the same person. “My life has two parts — prior to being institutionalized and life after,” he said. “And my mission for myself has been to unify that.”

That is because life after being institutionalized has led Arauz back to his past in order to find his way forward.

“The mind knows yesterday, and it’s good as a tool, but it shouldn’t determine who you are,” he said. “I haven’t rewritten my life, but I’ve reinterpreted it.”

It started here, in East Brunswick, where Arauz’s first experiences with mental illness came in the form of his father’s own bipolar disorder — a man, Arauz said, who would go on to try and run his son down with his car in a local parking lot before eventually dying homeless on the streets, never having received the help and treatment he so desperately needed.

His mother would go on to remarry, and Arauz would go on to attend Rutgers University. But when he was arrested in New Brunswick for a DUI at 19, his life again changed dramatically. He was off to the Navy.

“The thing that changed my life was the United States Navy,” he said. “It gave me a purpose. I never had a cause before.”

Arauz served four years as an electronics technician on a destroyer as part of the Maritime Interdiction Force in the Persian Gulf before receiving a medical discharge in 1994 for longtime foot problems.

“Ironically, on medical leave I was in charge of the barracks housing men getting psychiatric discharges,” he recalled.

At the time, Arauz still had no idea he had a psychiatric disorder, but those three men became the second important image of mental illness in his life.

“Their names were Lee, Rich and Mike, and they were my first advocacy cause.”

A year later came the manic episode in the Chicago airport. After a stint at the Carrier Clinic in Belle Mead, Arauz tried to do things his own way and get better on his own. Ten months later came the VA hospital and a visit that lasted for months, culminating with Arauz spending 24 hours straight in four-point restraints.

When he got out in 1996, he came back to this house and this couch. When his stepfather got sick, Arauz got sober.

He also reapplied to Rutgers and was accepted into the American Studies program. In New Brunswick, he saw people all around him reading 12-step books, self-help books, cookbooks ... people who seemed to find something important in the words of others, something that could be important for him, too.

“Maybe all books are existential cookbooks,” he said. “Once you learn to read the world, oftentimes you’ll be able to learn to read yourself. You become literate in existence.”

Arauz is well and widely read, but two books hold particular importance in his life today: Dante’s “Inferno” and W.E.B. DuBois’ “The Souls of Black Folk.” In “Inferno,” the first of three parts in the author’s “Divine Comedy,” Dante is led through the circles of hell by ancient Roman poet Virgil.

“I needed Virgils, and I found them more in writers,” said Arauz. “I needed people that were from hell, that had been burned, so I could feel confident enough to show my burns, because they weren’t going away.”

He found a similar message in “The Souls of Black Folk.”

“I was offered a guidebook into my own experience through DuBois. I was either going to learn to live with my whippings and be truly free or never get off the plantation of my mind.”

Arauz met his second wife, Cheryl, during his time at Rutgers. They married in 2000, and in 2009, their daughter Olivia was born.

“That was something big enough to make me challenge [myself] at every corner,” said Arauz. “And that’s my mission.”

Arauz and his family live with his mother in the house where she made that first tearful phone call to the police while he sat on the same couch 17 years ago, after he was flown home from Chicago.

Recently, Arauz wrote his own book, “An American’s Resurrection,” which he will be self-publishing this August.

“The basic message of the book is how to come alive,” he said.

Arauz also has plans to launch a resiliency institute next year with the same mission, but first he will spend the rest of this year traveling and speaking to students, teachers, doctors and government officials from St. Louis to Seattle about how to live with their own scars and the scars of others.

“I try to be a Virgil. I step into people’s hells,” he said.

“You succeed alone, but you suffer together.”

NAMI is the country's largest grassroots organization for mental health education and advocacy. According to NAMI, mental illness affects nearly 60 million Americans, impacting the lives of one in four adults and one in 10 children.

NAMI New Jersey's "Step Forward for Our Heroes" 5K walk will begin at 11 a.m., with check-in starting at 9:30, and is supporting the mental health needs of service men and women, veterans and their families.

For more information or to register for the walk, visit [www.naminj.org](http://www.naminj.org).

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