







## DO YOU LOVE SOMEONE WITH A MENTAL ILLNESS?

*Local group helps relatives mount hurdles*

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When Adam Lanza murdered 26 people at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn., last December, people wondered about his family members, whether he suffered from a mental illness, and whether his mother – who was also murdered by Lanza – could have done anything to stop the onslaught. News outlets reported that Lanza suffered from schizophrenia, a mental illness, and Asperger's Syndrome, which is not a mental illness. The alleged schizophrenia turned out to be a falsehood.

Sisters, brothers, mothers, fathers, and children of those with mental illness face unique struggles: Trying to force their loved ones into treatment they may not believe they need; dealing with stereotypes from those around them, getting the right services in time.

NAMI, the National Alliance on Mental Illness, meets monthly in Hudson County as a support group for relatives with those of mental illness, as well as some who suffer from the illnesses. NAMI's Hudson County affiliate has been active for nearly two decades, but in recent years suffered a bit of a collapse. The group, which works with acute mental health patients, such as those with anxiety or schizophrenia, was originally led by Martha Silva, a Guttenberg resident who worked tirelessly to schedule meetings and provide information. However, Silva has since moved on to found NAMI Espanol, a statewide chapter of the national organization geared towards Spanish speaking mental health patients, or "consumers," as they're referred to in the field. Now, a new corps of advocates is working to restore NAMI Hudson County to its previous levels of activity.

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## have no control over.” - Brenda Luchetti.

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The group will begin meeting monthly again on April 9 at 6:30 at Hoboken’s Community Mental Health Center, 506 Third St., near the hospital.

Brenda Luchetti, a psychiatric counselor at the center, will speak about stereotypes of mental health patients.

### **Group’s reemergence**

Kristiana Kalab, a Jersey City public school teacher and NAMI Hudson County’s new president, is no stranger to dealing with mental illness, and said in an interview that most of NAMI Hudson County’s members have dealt with it on a personal level, rather than simply clinically or academically.

“The real strength of NAMI’s programs are that, by the nature of the way they’re designed, the teachers have walked the path that those taking the courses are now finding themselves on,” she said.

Wayne Vivian, NAMI Hudson County’s longtime vice president, said that the even parents and family members who only come to a few sessions usually take something useful away from it.

“It’s a natural way of connecting,” he said. “There’s a commonality there, everyone is going through either the same thing or something similar that you are.”

Vivian has dealt with anxiety and depression throughout his life.

“We really want people, both consumers and family members, to know that there is support for them out there,” he said. “No matter what your situation is, we want to help.”

### **Upcoming event**

The group’s open house is for those interested in learning about the various courses and support groups the organization offers. The center is located just four blocks from the Second Street Light Rail Station and also provides free parking for those who wish to attend.

The event will feature Luchetti as a guest speaker. She has been involved with NAMI Hudson County for many years and in 2011, worked to establish Hoboken as a mental health stigma-free zone, the first of its kind in New Jersey. Luchetti said that she will focus her talk on the self-esteem issues that can arise in the life of a consumer as a result of discrimination or stigmatization based on media depictions of mentally ill people.

“People with mental illness don’t get treatment because they’re ashamed, but they shouldn’t feel ashamed of something they have no control over,” said Luchetti.

She will focus parts of her talk on recruiting people to partake in NAMI Hudson County's various programs, which will be offered even in a time when the field is rapidly changing and cuts to Medicaid and other programs are common.

Luchetti said that following the establishment of Hoboken's stigma-free zone, Luchetti and other NAMI members advised members of the police force on successful ways to deal with potentially dangerous consumers. And in schools, Luchetti worked with eighth and ninth graders on stigma-breaking and organized an essay contest on the subject.

### **NAMI's programs**

NAMI Hudson County offers programs for consumers themselves, parents of children with mental illness, and family members charged with providing care for adult consumers.

Support group meetings take place every second Tuesday of the month, except for August, at 7 p.m. at the center.

Programs for parents and family members are designed as informational courses attempting to teach the necessary skills to accomplish the difficult task of working with consumers.

"When I took the course, what I found most useful was learning how to communicate," said Kalab. "You can't communicate with someone who is going through psychotic breaks the same way as a normal person."

NAMI Basics, the course offered to parents of children with mental illness, was devised by Teri Brister, the national organization's Director of Programs for Young Families and the mother and sister of schizophrenics. The course allows parents to connect with one another while becoming educated and empowering themselves to overcome the challenges of raising a child suffering from a mental illness.

The six-week course is taught by parents or other primary caregivers who have undergone similar experiences, and focuses on the biology of mental illness and making sure your child's diagnosis is correct, an overview of treatment options, and methods for dealing with the impact of a child's illness on the rest of the family, including siblings.

"I love the idea that [the class] is peer taught by parents, for parents," said one participant.

The Family-to-Family course, which is 12 weeks long, is designed to help family members with insights into, and resolution of, the difficulties that arise from providing care to family members. Kalab said that the sheer scope of these difficulties can be severely overwhelming for care providers.

"Everything from successfully interacting with healthcare providers to gaining insights into the different types of treatments to dealing with the episodes that someone with mental illness can have is discussed," said Kalab, who teaches Hudson County NAMI's class.

Kalab said that it can be difficult to predict the actions of someone with mental illness, and in many occasions, convincing them to continue to take medication or undergo treatment poses problems.

“And additionally, dealing with the police in the event that an episode turns dangerous can be very difficult,” she said. “The course covers that as well.”

For more information on NAMI, visit the national organization’s website at [www.nami.org](http://www.nami.org) or the New Jersey chapter’s website at [www.naminj.org](http://www.naminj.org). For information on the April 9 open house, call (201) 963-0164.

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