

Marjorie Strohsahl and Breaking the Stigma: National Alliance on Mental Illness

By Edan Stanley



While National Mental Health Month is in May, the first full week of October is Mental Illness Awareness Week, a time to learn more about the stigma associated with a real part of many of our lives. Mental illness is a broad umbrella term that encompasses a variety of disorders including anxiety, bipolar, borderline personality, obsessive-compulsive, eating, post-traumatic stress disorders, as well as depression, schizophrenia and many more.

The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) was created over 30 years ago by a group of families that came together to find support and solutions to help their loved ones with mental illness live their best lives. The organization is dedicated to improving the lives of those affected by mental illness through support, education and advocacy.

Sparta resident, Marjorie Strohsahl thought back to when she was growing up and attended church with her aunt who was mentally ill.

"It wasn't something anyone talked about, it was kept private and brushed to the side for my aunt and a lot of others, and that social stigma prevented so many from living fulfilling lives," said Marjorie.

In 1979, a small group of families who were struggling to adequately care for their loved ones affected by mental illness, knew that more resources had to become available and better discussions surrounding the sensitive topic needed to be had.

"It was about breaking down the stigma and finding ways together to help their family members. Today, NAMI is the largest grassroots, volunteer, non-profit mental health organization of its kind. The organization has created numerous educational programs, support groups and platforms to break the unfortunate stigma associated with those suffering from a mental illness," said Marjorie.

The 501(c)3 nonprofit national organization of NAMI based in Virginia, has associated state affiliate groups. Marjorie's sister, Kathleen, who has a family member with a mental illness, read about a course offered by NAMI and decided to take it.

"Kathleen came to me and said the course she had just finished was an absolute god-send," said Marjorie. "She went on to meet the NAMI NJ President, Dr. Mark Perrin, and he asked her to head the then inactive Sussex [County] NAMI program. My sister came to me and begged me to be the secretary for three months, just so she could get it up and running."

At the time, Marjorie was already heavily involved with numerous organizations including the Sparta Historical Society, Sparta Woman's Club, NJSWFC and more, but she knew how important this organization could be to our area.

"At the very first support meeting we held, we did our best to get the word out but I was simply not prepared for the turn-out. It was extraordinary to see so many people coming through the door and willing to share their personal stories. It helped more people recognize the great need to break these pre-conceived ideas of those who are affected."

The first meeting of the Sussex NAMI affiliate was about 10 years ago and Marjorie credits her sister Kathleen, their friend Jeri Doherty and herself as the "three-musketeers" for bringing it back to life. In 2009, they won the "Outstanding Affiliate Revitalization Efforts Award" from NAMI NJ and the 2010 "Ambassador Award for Mental Health Service" from the NJ Governor's Council on Mental Health Stigma.

Marjorie said, "We had speaking presentations called 'In Our Own Voices' where people living with mental illness would come to speak and share their stories. It helped people see that mental illness is not something that should keep you from living a happy and meaningful life."

One project in particular, the NAMI National Homefront Project, was created to help veterans and their family re-acclimate to life back home after service.

Some of the other programs NAMI offers include:

- **Family to Family** – Free 12-week course for families/caregivers of those with a major mental illness.
- **Law Enforcement Education** – training for those encountering the mentally ill in their daily work.
- **Educate the Educators** – in-service training for teachers and school personnel provided at low cost.
- **Every Mind Matters** – teaches children how to take good care of themselves, mind and body.
- **In Our Own Voice** – free multimedia presentation by those in recovery.

"People often don't realize that there is so much more to mental illness than meets the eye and it affects many more people in so many different walks of life," said Marjorie. "NAMI is adamant about helping people affected in whatever way they need it, whether it be someone to talk to, someone to help with legal affairs to ensure your loved one is taken care of if you can no longer support them, teaching people how to interact with one another and helping those affected live purposeful and enriching lives."

Please visit www.nami-sussex-nj.org for more information.



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