



Empowering families of kids with mental illness **By Madeline Monheit and Elisabeth Hagen**

On May 30, 45 children and their families walked as a team in the NAMI Mercer walk-a-thon in Lawrenceville, raised more money than any other team, and made a statement against stigma. They came out to pay tribute to Kenny Baker, a local teenager who committed suicide in his senior year of high school.

Suicide is the third leading cause of death for children ages 10–24 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). Mental health problems affect one in every five young people. Sadly, only 30 percent receive the services they need.

For 25 years, NAMI Mercer, an organization of families, has supported, educated and brought hope to families with children affected by mental illness.

NAMI Mercer helped Maria Mastro come to grips with the diagnoses of her two eldest children. A year later, during her keynote address at NAMI's annual fundraiser, she held up a jar of glass fragments and compared it to her initial devastation.

NAMI Mercer helped Maria put the pieces back together, so she deeply desired to reach out to other children and their families. NAMI's Just Kids program was the perfect venue for her mission.

Just Kids is a social group that offers recreational and volunteer service activities for children with mental illness and a support group for their parents. Currently, there are 42 enrollees, ranging in age from 4 to 18, eligible to join group activities on the third Saturday of each month. The program is free of charge.

"With Just Kids, parents can relax and have fun with their children," comments Lauren Agoratus, whose daughter has autism spectrum, ADHD and several other mental and physical disorders. "It's a place where kids can get together without barriers or stigma," continues Joanna Harrison-Smith, the program leader.

Of the many difficulties Joanne Johnson has faced in dealing with her son with mental illness, social stigma is perhaps the worst. "It is sad when people shun you and your child," laments Joanne. Equally painful are the labels imposed by schools and society.

"In my school years, these children were called mentally retarded," recalls Joanna Harrison-Smith. "The impact was devastating. What is the difference in

using “IEP” (Individualized Education Program) today? According to Maria, the same is true for the label “special.” She wrote:

“Special means damaged, broken and lame.
They use a nice word but the meaning’s the same.”

When Irv Newman attended his first Just Kids session, he was surprised to encounter “a lovely group of bright, lively and engaging kids...children [who] are learning to deal with their problems in quite positive ways.” He now leads a story hour to occupy the kids while their parents attend NAMI Mercer’s Parent Support Group.

Lauren Agoratus is grateful for NAMI Mercer’s leadership in services to parents. “We need information, and we also need to know how to take care of ourselves,” she said. In 2003, Lauren took the Visions for Tomorrow Program (now called NAMI Basics). Three years later, she volunteered to teach the class. Today, Lauren is the New Jersey coordinator for Family Voices, a nationwide advocacy group for families who have children with special health needs. Lauren also is a new member of the NAMI Mercer Board.

In 2001, Joanne Johnson, a microbiologist for Schering-Plough, became one of the initial 12 Visions teachers in the state (all Visions teachers have children with mental illness). Since then, she has taught two courses per year, in spring and fall. “Parents often arrive in crisis,” remarks Joanne, “but they leave empowered, no longer isolated and with friendships that continue after graduation.”

NAMI Basics is a free, six-class program for parents or primary caregivers of children or adolescents with challenging behaviors. These can include mental health issues, ADHD, autism and Tourette Syndrome.

The curriculum covers the trauma of mental illness for the child and family, the biology of mental illness, treatment options and the latest medical research, and an overview of the systems involved in caring for children and teens.

NAMI Mercer encourages parents with concerns about their children’s behavior or thinking to contact our Helpline (609) 799-8994 and to talk to their family physician.

Published in the *Times of Trenton*, July 19, 2009, A11