



NAMI Mercer helping area families for 25 years

First in a monthly series

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In the early 1980s, four anguished Mercer County families started meeting in each other's homes. Each family had a member with a diagnosis of mental illness. They needed information, help, and a safe place to talk about their problems.

Gradually, other families joined the group. In 1984, NAMI Mercer, a local affiliate of the National Alliance on Mental Illness, was duly incorporated.

Today, as NAMI Mercer celebrates its 25th anniversary, more than 3,000 people in Mercer County directly benefit from its free programs each year. Although the organization has grown in size and complexity, the driving force remains the same: "Families Meeting the Challenge of Mental Illness."

Since 1995, NAMI's primary vehicle for empowering families has been its unique Family-to-Family (FTF) education program.

Family-to-Family is a free, 12-week course for caregivers of adults with serious and persistent mental illness. The course was designed by mental health professionals who had personal experience with the mental illness of a close family member. The trained teachers always are NAMI members.

Originally called "The Journey of Hope," FTF is offered twice a year in Lawrenceville and in Trenton. Next fall, NAMI Mercer hopes to present the course in Spanish. More than 500 Mercer County residents are graduates of the program.

On a larger scale, FTF is taught in 48 states, two provinces in Canada, and in Mexico. It has touched the lives of more than 150,000 persons. Qualitative studies, funded by the National Institute of Mental Health, have demonstrated the program's effectiveness in increasing the perceived empowerment of the participants.

"Family-to-Family teaches a new way of being," explains Michelle Zechner, who has taught the course four times. "Blame and shame are taken away, and coping with the family situation becomes part of everyday life. We teach people to rely on each other by building a sense of community."

The FTF curriculum is based on the "biopsychosocial" model, that is, the interaction of biological, psychological, and socio-cultural factors all of which play a significant role in mental illness. The first four sessions deal with the biology of mental illness, the nature of the diseases, the structure of the brain, and how it is affected. This section also covers symptoms, medications, treatment options and their benefits and risks.

"This information conveys both absolution and confirmation," comments Linda McGrath, who has led FTF groups since 1998. "Half of the students feel relief, as though the weight of the world has been lifted from their shoulders. The others find themselves having to face their worst fears, but this is a very compassionate environment."

McGrath also coordinates course schedules, reviews all registrations, and appoints the teaching teams. According to McGrath, FTF requires a big commitment on the part of the volunteer instructors. For 12 weeks, they join doctors and nurses as crucial contacts for participating families that may be in crisis mode. "A leader must be willing to take calls at all hours."

In spite of the time, effort, and responsibility, teachers volunteer over and over. Wendy Most, who has taught the class eight times and will lead the spring session at the Galilee Baptist Church, says: "It's very rewarding. You learn as much as you teach. People are survivors."

The program also requires a big commitment on the part of the students. "Not everyone is ready for the FTF experience," says McGrath. "Some are too upset to absorb the information and need to talk to a professional first." For these people, NAMI Mercer makes referrals to Intensive Family Support Services (IFFS), a state-funded service that offers supportive activities designed to improve the quality of life for families with a mentally ill relative.

After providing a biological/medical foundation for mental illness, the second part of the FTF curriculum covers what it is like to suffer from mental illness and how to live with affected people. This is the time that classmates begin to bond.

"Before taking the course," notes Tom Pyle, who will begin teaching FTF in the spring, "it seemed that no one understood the relentless burden of mental illness, the difficulties and frustration it can bring to families, and of course, to the afflicted. But in FTF, everyone knew exactly what we were experiencing."

"Mental illness in the family is still a personal, private issue, and people are apt to be embarrassed and ashamed," adds Michelle Zechner. Unfortunately, stigma still exists. For this reason, the instructor and participants promise to preserve confidentiality; the sense of security is one of the course's greatest benefits.

No outsiders are allowed into sessions. "Social workers and even NAMI board members have asked to observe, but it is vital for participants to know they are in a roomful of people who are going through the same experiences," assures Linda McGrath.

Although students are encouraged to share their own stories, the instructor does not tailor the course to meet their particular needs. There is a factual curriculum that teaches the knowledge and skills that family members need to cope more effectively.

"We don't do therapy," says McGrath. "We do understanding."

The final part of the FTF course shows families how to become better advocates for their relatives. Unfortunately, institutionalized stigma still denies people with mental illness equal access to work, schools, housing, insurance, medical care, and community resources.

Grassroots advocacy efforts do make a difference. "The recent passage of the federal Paul Wellstone-Pete Domenici Mental Health Parity and Addiction Act was a tremendous victory for our cause," remarked Dr. William Hayes, president of the NAMI Mercer Board.

FTF will be offered in two locations in the spring. Classes at Galilee Baptist Church in Trenton begin on Tuesday, Mar. 3. Classes begin at the NAMI Center of Mercer County in Lawrenceville on Thursday, Mar. 5. The program is free, but registration is required. For more information, call (609) 799-8994.