



IOOV gets message out about mental illness

BY MADELINE MONHEIT AND ELISABETH HAGEN

Jay Yudof, coordinator of NAMI New Jersey's In Our Own Voice (IOOV) program, recalls one of his favorite moments in scheduling a presentation.

"Members of a high school psychology club requested an IOOV speaker with schizophrenia. I had to tell them that all of our speakers with schizophrenia were currently employed during the day, but we could offer a speaker with a mood disorder."

Yudof's response is consistent with the goal of IOOV: to demonstrate first hand that recovery from mental illness is possible. The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) developed this unique education program in 2002 with a grant from the Eli Lilly Company. At each hour-long presentation, two trained consumers share their compelling personal stories about living with mental illness and achieving recovery.

NAMI Mercer, an affiliate of the national organization, began offering IOOV presentations in 2003. The first presenter was Robin Cunningham, a retired senior corporate officer with several international industry-leading corporations, who has lived with schizophrenia since the age of thirteen.

Since the founding of NAMI Mercer 25 years ago, research has yielded greater knowledge about the brain, and both medications and health services have improved significantly. The National Institute of Mental Health reports that successful treatment of illnesses such as schizophrenia (60 percent), depression (70-80 percent) and panic disorder (70-90 percent) now surpass those of other medical conditions such as heart disease (45-50 percent).

Nevertheless, misconceptions about mental illness still are widespread with devastating consequences for individuals and the entire society. "Stigma has its fingerprints all over the system," reported U.S. Surgeon General David Satcher in 2001. For those living with mental illness, stigma remains the primary barrier to recovery, wellness, and full social integration.

According to IOOV Coordinator Erika Reading, last year, NAMI Mercer delivered 69 presentations to 1,897 persons. The audiences included church congregations, law enforcement officers, students and faculty, health care providers, scientists, non-profits, consumers and their families, and a wide range of community and civic organizations. All presentations are free.

Each IOOV presentation follows the journey to recovery through its five major stages: Dark Days; Acceptance; Treatment; Coping Skills; and Successes, Hopes and Dreams. The presenter introduces each stage with a brief video and then relates his personal experience.

Galen Valley, who delivered the highest number of NAMI Mercer presentations in 2008, gauges his audience and carefully tailors his speech accordingly.

Galen's most effective presentations have been to people in recovery from substance addiction to whom he presents an image of success. In recent months, his most memorable group was an audience of about 60 men at Vincent's Place, a program of Rescue Mission of Trenton.

"They were a hard-nosed crowd," he said, "but they showed an intense interest."

A memorable audience for Robin Cunningham was a roomful of scientists at the Wyeth Neuroscience facility in Princeton. Although involved in developing psychotropic medications, none of them had ever seen a person with mental illness performing at such a high level.

"When we talk to people involved in the research and marketing of psychiatric medications, we want them to realize that their products affect *whole* people, not just symptoms," explains Yudof.

IOOV also helps law enforcement officers to see the whole person and not just the disease. NAMI Mercer recently made series of presentations to emergency 911 operators.

"We feel a certain sense of value in knowing that a subset of the operators now have a better understanding of what is going on in a person or household when they receive a desperate call," continues Yudof.

Throughout an IOOV presentation, audience members are encouraged to ask questions and offer feedback. The more face-to-face contact they have with the consumer, the more likely they are to change their negative perceptions about mental illness.

In addition to fighting stigma, IOOV also provides an opportunity for consumers to gain self-confidence, self-esteem, and income while serving as role models for the community.

Carol Kivler, who has been hospitalized four times for acute bouts of depression and who has received more than 50 treatments of electroconvulsive therapy (ECT), regards IOOV as her calling. She is the founder of Courageous Recovery, a company that raises awareness about mental illness and instills hope to those living with it.

"It became abundantly clear that I am gifted with the ability to inspire others through encouraging words and actions when I speak openly about my experiences of living with clinical depression...I am a fortunate individual who gets to live my purpose each time I stand up to speak," explains Kivler.

If you are interested in scheduling a NAMI Mercer IOOV presentation to your group, call (609) 799-8994 or email a request to home@namimercer.org.

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