



Night Out with NAMI Slated for Jan. 10
By Madeline Monheit and Elisabeth Hagen

Twenty-five years have passed since the founding of NAMI Mercer by a small group of families struggling to cope with the mental illness of a loved one. At about the same time, State Senator Richard J. Codey went undercover to expose the deplorable conditions at Marlboro Psychiatric Hospital, and his wife Mary Jo felt so ashamed of her clinical depression that she wore dark glasses and traveled far from home to purchase her medication.

Much has changed since then due to the advocacy efforts of organizations like NAMI Mercer, the responsiveness and commitment of legislators like Senator Codey, and the courage of public figures like Mary Jo Codey to tell their personal stories.

And so, it is very fitting that Senator Codey and Mary Jo Codey will serve as honorary chairs of our benefit concert/dinner, Night Out with NAMI, on Sun., Jan. 10, 2010, at the College of New Jersey in Ewing. This gala event will mark the culmination of NAMI Mercer's 25th anniversary, a year of significant victories for families affected by mental illness.

Our anniversary closely followed the passage of the federal Paul Wellstone-Pete Domenici Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act, requiring insurance companies to treat mental health on an equal basis with physical illnesses, when policies cover both. New Jersey's new outpatient commitment law, sponsored by Senator Codey, was signed by Gov. Corzine on Aug. 11 and represents another milestone. It provides for outpatient monitoring for individuals who present a danger to themselves or others by refusing treatment.

"I hope [the law] will bring peace of mind to the many families that struggle to get their loved ones into treatment," commented Codey in a recent interview by NAMI Mercer.

We also asked Senator Codey to consider his most significant contributions to improving the lives of people affected by mental illness.

"Without a doubt," answered Codey, "the accomplishments that resulted from the Mental Health Taskforce that I convened when I was Governor. With a sizeable increase in funding for mental health services, we were able to create a lot of changes on the ground level, increasing access to mental health treatment within our communities."

The taskforce also created the Governor's Council on Mental Health Stigma, which still exists today. "One of the greatest barriers to getting people into treatment is helping them overcome the stigma attached to mental illness and making them realize that it is a disease just like cancer or diabetes and not a personal shortcoming," said the senator.

The Codeys fully understand the effects of mental illness on their family and the devastating impact of stigma. After the birth of her first child in 1984, Mary Jo began experiencing intrusive thoughts about hurting her baby. Horrified by these images and unaware of Postpartum Depression (PPD), she entered a psychiatric hospital. Although she recovered with the help of medication, she hid her illness from her family and friends.

After years of silence, Mary Jo decided to speak out. "What led me to go public was the recognition that we wanted a baby with our whole heart and soul [the Codeys had undergone three years of fertility treatment], and then quickly after his birth, I became so mentally ill. I knew it had to be a disease and other women could relate."

Mary Jo also has helped dispel misconceptions about electroconvulsive therapy (ECT), which helped her overcome depression during her second pregnancy. "People still think that the procedure is barbaric, [but] it can be a real lifesaver for those who do not respond well to anti-depressants," stated Mary Jo.

For many years, Mary Jo has advocated for laws to eliminate stigma and encourage women to seek help. The "Speak Up When You're Down" program, initiated during her husband's administration, encourages women and their families to talk openly about depression after childbirth and provides a 24/7 PPD Helpline. Next came the NJ law requiring doctors to screen all new mothers for PPD.

Currently, Mary Jo is the principal advocate for the national Melanie Blocker Stokes MOTHERS bill which passed unanimously in the House and awaits approval by the Senate. The MOTHERS law will ensure that all women and their families are educated about PPD and will provide research into the causes and treatment of this illness.

Although much has been accomplished during the past 25 years, much remains to be done. Given the financial crisis and cutbacks in government spending, progress will be difficult in the near term. During these hard times, the role of organizations like NAMI will be more important than ever.

"Our biggest challenge is to provide greater outreach into homes and communities so that people are aware of the services available to them...We also need to find new ways to provide support to families so they too can help

their loved ones deal with mental illness,” believes Senator Codey. This is precisely NAMI Mercer’s mission.

This year's Night Out recital and dinner will mark Dr. Richard Kogan's eighth appearance on behalf of NAMI Mercer. Kogan, a New York City psychiatrist and an internationally known classical pianist, will commemorate the 200th anniversary of the birth of Frédéric Chopin by playing selections of his work and discussing the healing power of music in the composer’s life.

Proceeds from the event will sustain NAMI Mercer’s education, advocacy, and mutual support programs for families of persons affected by mental illness. All programs are free to the public. NAMI Mercer, an affiliate of the National Alliance on Mental Illness, is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization.

For more information about Night Out with NAMI and to purchase tickets, call 609-799-8994 or go www.namimercer.org.

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