



“The Soloist” and Beyond

By Madeline Monheit, Elisabeth Hagen, and Bill Wilmot

On May 6, Princeton’s Garden Theater hosted a showing of “The Soloist” and donated all proceeds to three organizations concerned with housing and mental illness: Mercer Alliance to End Homelessness, Greater Trenton Behavioral Health Care, and the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI Mercer NJ).

“The Soloist” is based on a true story. Steve Lopez, a reporter for the Los Angeles Times, writes a series of articles about Nathaniel Ayers, a homeless, middle-aged loner who plays classical music on a two-string violin. Suffering from schizophrenia, Nathaniel withdrew from the Juilliard School of Music and his caring family thirty years earlier and became a street person on L.A.’s Skid Row.

NAMI Mercer applauds the film makers for raising public awareness about the two million Americans with schizophrenia and the plight of the homeless, of whom one third suffer from mental illness. By presenting a close-up view of a person with mental illness and his daily struggles, the film serves to increase understanding and reduce stigma.

Nevertheless, NAMI Mercer is concerned that the film fails to explore all available options for helping a loved one with schizophrenia. Nathaniel’s life improves with the support of Lopez and community resources, but his medical condition goes unaddressed. Viewers may assume that his condition is untreatable, when, in fact, schizophrenia is a chronic, but manageable disease.

According to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), available treatments can eliminate many of the symptoms. In 1999, the Surgeon General reported that with medical care, about 50 percent of patients improve significantly or recover completely over time.

“We believe strongly that everyone who has mental illness should have the opportunity to work toward full recovery,” asserts NAMI Mercer President Dr. William Hayes, a practicing psychiatrist. “The support of friends and the stable housing Nathaniel receives are necessary, but not sufficient. Intervention requires a thorough diagnostic evaluation and treatment that may include psychotherapy, stress management, medication, exercise, education and vocational training.”

Past NAMI Mercer President Bill Wilmot believes recovery from schizophrenia

means becoming all that a person can be; living a life of meaning, purpose and fulfillment. “Resignation — the decision not to try treatment — comes only when all current possibilities for recovery have been exhausted. The certainty of new developments means the decision should never be final.”

Sadly, only a third of persons with schizophrenia receive treatment. Furthermore, there is an enormous delay, averaging 8.5 years, between the appearance of symptoms and the start of treatment.

“Most major mental illnesses first manifest during the college years,” notes NAMI Mercer Executive Director Sally Osmer. Since early intervention and treatment are critical to preventing long-term effects of the illness, NAMI Mercer has begun an educational outreach program at colleges and universities throughout Mercer County.

The speakers in NAMI Mercer’s In Our Own Voice (IOOV) program make the best possible case for treatment. Their stories reveal the pain of their illnesses, setbacks and disappointments; their recovery is a triumph beyond measure.

Robin Cunningham, now retired from a successful business career, is an experienced IOOV presenter. When he was diagnosed with schizophrenia at age 13, his mother entered him into treatment against his will. “In effect, I was forcibly treated,” he said. “I was put on the only medication then available, which made me just barely functional, yet my doctor insisted that I go to school.”

High school was painful for a boy whose eccentricities made him conspicuous, but the vice principal and his doctor worked together to find solutions. Robin believes this combination of forced medication, cognitive behavioral therapy and normal activity saved him from complete withdrawal and gave him the basis on which to build his life.

Abigail, another inspiring IOOV speaker, was diagnosed with bipolar and schizoaffective disorders after earning an undergraduate degree at Duke University and a Master of Divinity degree from Princeton Theological Seminary. At first, she was not compliant. After four years in and out of the hospital, Abigail had an opportunity to get into group housing if she agreed to give her medications a chance. She moved into a quiet, suburban home, managed by NAMI Mercer, and has lived there with three roommates for the past 12 years.

Abigail now works full time for Collaborative Support Programs of New Jersey. As part of her wellness routine, she joins Just Friends, a social group sponsored by NAMI Mercer, for walks and other activities.

NAMI Mercer encourages readers to see “The Soloist” and also to remember that with medical treatment, schizophrenia is manageable. Our mission is to assist families in all matters relating to mental illness. Please support our efforts to end homelessness and to give everyone who has mental illness the opportunity to recover. For information, call (609) 799-8994 or visit

www.namimercer.org.

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