

Bill and Betty Wolfe, 2018 Pillar Award Winners

Bill and Betty Wolfe learned in the late 80s that their daughter, Katherine, was dangerously ill with bipolar depression. Though she had been seeing various psychiatrists and took medication, she had to stop her studies at Oberlin College. Five years of intense struggle followed, with new medication trials, different types of therapy, and part-time studies and jobs. Throughout, Katherine resisted being typecast as mentally ill. She earned a bachelor's degree at the University of Pennsylvania with distinction in 1993 and went on to work at the Pew Foundation before enrolling in business school at Chicago University. Still under treatment for bipolar illness, Katherine experienced another breakdown and returned home in a state of deep depression in 1996. She attempted to take her life that December, but saved by heroic medical efforts, she renewed her quest for wellness.

“What was difficult for us,” said Bill, “was in those days, psychiatrists would not discuss what a patient was telling them even with closest family members. We could not talk openly to the psychiatrists.” Looking for support and information, the Wolfes visited NAMI Mercer on the advice of a friend. They joined NAMI Mercer in 1996 and took a Family-to-Family course run by Bill Wilmot. “There was no internet, so the course gave the two of us a common frame of reference,” said Betty. “We got important information—and support from other couples—through listening and talking,” she added. Betty also remembers benefiting from NAMI's education sessions in the Lawrence library.

NAMI Mercer began partnering with Intensive Family Support Services. “This was a life-saver for us,” agreed Betty and Bill. “It helped us all to live together again and help us support Katherine as a whole person,” added Betty.

At the time, NAMI's small office on Lakeside Drive in Lawrence Township was run by volunteers Chomy and Tom Garces as Director and Treasurer. Linda McGrath worked the Helpline, and Kay Lasley was president. NAMIMercer was growing fast, and when the first professional director came on board and fundraising efforts intensified, Betty volunteered to help and set up a database to record gifts and produce thank you letters.

Bill was invited to serve on the NAMIMercer Board and became treasurer in 2001. He introduced Quicken accounting to the new director, hired a part-time bookkeeper and a new auditor. He also introduced graphics to the financials in NAMIMercer's annual report and later set up a basic ladder of savings bonds to provide a steady income stream. Betty joined the committee for NAMIMercer's first public fundraising event in 2002 and continued to work on annual fundraisers, running the silent auction with Carol Nied and one year, serving as chair of the event. As a thank you to her parents, Katherine came down from her new home in the Boston area to help out and sell “Tricky Tray” tickets.

Bill's architectural skills have proved to be the family's most visible legacy at NAMIMercer. He led the search committee for office space that resulted in moving to Lawrence Commons in 2005 and helped find our current office in 2017. After each move, Bill reconfigured the space for NAMIMercer's needs and continued growth. At the Lawrence Commons office, he used the top-of-the-line office furniture that Louise Mehrotra, a Janssen executive and NAMI board member, had arranged for Janssen to donate. He also designed a large education room, to enable education

meetings at the office and provide library and work space as well. Bill's design included NAMIMercer's mission statement in a frieze atop the walls. "I thought it was important to put our mission right out where everyone would see it," said Bill. He remembers applying the type with Bob Demer's help. A new center for everyone, the room required the expense of additional furniture. Betty and Bill called on Bill's sister and brother to pitch in with them to equip the room in honor of their mother, Olga Wolfe.

As Bill reconfigured the new NAMIMercer office in Hamilton last year, everyone wanted to replicate the education room. Betty and Bill provided funds for the required fit-out, while the board rethought and modified the mission statement. Bill updated the frieze's font and layout for the new space and recruited John Marsland to help install the lettering. The statement now reads: "NAMI Mercer listens, leads, educates, and advocates, empowering families and individuals affected by mental illness to build better lives free of stigma and discrimination."

Tragically, in the interim years, Katherine became increasingly ill. Exhausted, she took her leave in December, 2013. NAMI Mercer friends gathered in support, and Bill continued to serve on the finance committee. Katherine's name was added to the new Wolfe Education Room dedication plaque.

Asked what NAMIMercer had done for two such loyal benefactors, Betty said "NAMI simply supported us. It helped us in intangible ways by keeping us from feeling isolated and giving us courage to talk with other people about mental illness and NAMI. It bolstered our own hope, and also introduced us to Intensive Family Support Services."

Bill said, "As you work for NAMI, you are working with people who are in similar circumstances. We made friends." While he was in the new office doing carpentry and other chores, Bill met many current members and volunteers. "I'm incredibly impressed with the Helpline volunteers," he said. "You would think they were trained counselors."

Both Bill and Betty are glad that NAMI Mercer has evolved so greatly since 1996. Successive executive directors have had profound effects. "Janet is wonderful at attracting good volunteers and getting them to do the right things," said Bill. "When we started, the volunteers were people our age, most of them parents. Now, they are younger and many of them are consumers." The new location on a bus route in Hamilton Township has opened up a whole new constituency and also attracted people from Trenton and the Windsors. Both NAMI's outreach and its efficacy are transformed. Betty noted, "Social anxiety was such a roadblock for Katherine. She found a great program in Boston, but when she moved back to Princeton in 2011, there was nothing similar. Now NAMI is offering this type of support!"

Bill and Betty Wolfe will receive the 2018 Pillar Award for distinguished service at Night Out with NAMI on November 17.