



BRAINSTORM

Everything you don't know

Vol. 3 no. 1

July 2010



EDITOR'S NOTE

by Phil Glosserman

Straight from the streets and the heart of Santa Monica, Brainstorm brings you “everything you don’t know.” The writers are members of Step Up on Second, the city’s leading resource for people living with mental illness, and they are all amazing.

In this issue, we focus on family. When mental illness strikes, it causes a rupture—in both person with the illness and their family. Everyone struggles to understand what is happening, what to do, and how to cope. Far too often, the family misunderstands or denies what is happening with their loved one. Mental illness is a long journey for all concerned. There are no easy answers or solutions, but as you will see, family support is a vital aspect of recovery.

Phil Glosserman is a member of Step Up's Board of Directors and is Brainstorm's advisor and editor.

REACTIONS

To comment on Brainstorm or to receive future issues by e-mail, please write us at brainstorm@mail.org.

Family is Where You Find It

by Sarah

Being part of a caring family is a basic human need, yet it is often exceedingly difficult for those of us who live with a mental illness to integrate into our own families. In addition to the anguish we already experience, we often feel rejected by society. Just like everyone else, we need to feel loved, included, and supported. On the family's part, it takes information, education, patience, and understanding. Even the smallest effort can mean so

much. The sense of inclusion is priceless. Unfortunately and far too often, mental illness can cause painful rifts and misunderstandings within the family.

My family has reacted to my illness in a variety of ways, yet all are rooted in denial. My loving and caring mother usually keeps silent about my illness. She never mentions my struggles to friends and family and is quiet when I'm symptomatic. She has, however, let me know that if she helps me she is enabling me to stay ill and that I just need to rouse myself to get better. What she and others don't yet understand is that it is not a matter of will power. People who have a mental illness cannot simply pull themselves up by their bootstraps or snap out of it. We need support from many resources, including family.

My father, on the other hand, divorced me when he divorced my mother. He told me countless times when I was growing up that the world is a harsh and cruel place and that I had to sink or swim. It was all up to me. He also expressed that because of my difficulties with mental illness, I had failed myself and him.

The greater part of my family pretends I don't exist. And when the subject of my illness does come up, in the words of my aunt, “Mental illness is the worst way to get attention.”

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STEP UP ON SECOND

Step Up on Second provides effective, compassionate services for individuals in our communities who have a mental illness. Our nationally-recognized program focuses on long-term strategies and daily support services to help our members receive treatment for their brain disorders, and achieve greater independence in their lives.

Step Up on Second, 1328 Second St., Santa Monica, CA 90401

For information, go to www.stepuponsecond.org or call (310) 394-6889

A Child's Rejection

by Anonymous

I was born in Jerusalem and have lived in the US for 47 years. I am the mother of four very intelligent grown children.

I have been living with bipolar disorder for 30 years. I try to do the best I can to manage my illness and myself. Step Up on Second is my second home. I get a lot of moral support from the members and staff.

Unfortunately, my family is not so supportive. My eldest son is a successful attorney and commissioner. I love him very much, but I do not like him. Let me explain.

My son is in denial. He refuses to believe that his mother has a mental illness. I have tried to explain my condition to him, but he does not listen. Every time I try to talk with him about it, he changes the subject or says I sound like a broken record. I am so tired of arguing with him.

My son avoids having close contact with me. He wants me to keep quiet around his friends and relatives. He does not want anyone to know about my illness. He feels it could ruin his reputation. He is too proud. He is ashamed of me. This hurts me very much.

I'm sure it is uncomfortable for him to accept that the person who gave him life has a mental illness. He probably wishes it would just go away.

To me, life is all about living and learning. I would like to see my son—as well as others who have loved ones affected by mental illness—take the time to learn more about it. They would find out that



living with a mental illness is very challenging. They might become more compassionate. They need to know that we need attention and respect, just like they do.

Postscript (one month later)

Writing this article about my relationship with my son was extremely painful for me. Tears streamed down my face as I read it to the Brainstorm writing group. It gave me the chance to get a lot off my chest and later I felt much better. I even felt like singing. As a result, I felt inspired to talk to my son about our problems. I called him and made an appointment to see him.

When we met, I spoke in a very calm voice. We

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A Family Interrupted and Reunited

by Les Jones

When someone has a mental illness, he or she feels at odds with the world. Family members struggle to understand what is happening and may blame themselves or each other for the illness. Frequently, the family blames the person for his or her illness. In reality, serious mental illnesses are biologically-based disorders that are no one's fault.

In my experience, most families do the best they can in the face of a difficult situation. These days, there are many treatments that can help people cope with mental illness. These treatments offer new hope and are transforming the fabric of families affected by mental illness—like mine.

For as long as I can remember, I experienced symptoms of schizoaffective disorder, which is a combination of a mood

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The Gulf

by Daniel Concharty

A prodigious son
Thus far I've come
So far from family

I stand alone and stoop to conquer
I wrench my back and heave my guts
No, I can't clean the mess of who I am
My innards shake, as yours must too
Why me? Why you?

You're my mother—why can't that be enough?
Your cries hurt and salt the wounds, so many, so sad
I'd be glad for a hug, an embrace of who I am

Oh Mom, you make every effort



And still you understand me not
You've been my nurturer, and at times, my detractor
Bathe me, swaddle me as you weep
That I may reap from this, your sustenance
I need your loving tears to keep me growing
To quench the painful and quiet parched landscape of my
heart
An empty vessel beating a rhythm of sadness, which separates
us eternally

Hold me close and love me for who I am
For I am who I am, doing the best I can...and I can't help it

I just love you and always hope you feel the same
Sometimes I feel so blessed and wouldn't trade you for the
world
And sometimes we live on the dark side of the moon

Mental illness is like a natural catastrophe. What scares us most is what we can't control, especially when it's unpredictable.

—Alan Evans

A Mother's Open Letter to Her Child

By an Anonymous Mother
of a Step Up on Second Member

I want so much to convey my heartbreak at the punishment you must endure with your illness. I walk through the fire with you, helpless to impact the hell raining down. How to continue, year after year? Where to find the strength and courage? There is a warrior in us both, but the adversary is cruel and relentless.

At times, I misplace my anger toward you, for which I am truly sorry. I know it is the same for you towards me.

Other times I get a brush of the sweet, kind, and peaceful people we are apart from this illness. Though fleeting, these moments are an oasis, a soothing balm.

I meet fellow travelers on this path and we immediately recognize one another – through eyes that have beheld “The Pit.” We are like the strangers, bonded forever, after a searing night together in an emergency waiting room.

Over time, I've come to know this struggle quite intimately, though not nearly as deeply as you. Not even close. You are the brave one, the courageous warrior, this illness your constant companion. It is beyond my power to do anything other than stand by, holding the knowledge that this is your path. And mine, as well.

If it were possible, the sheer volume of my will would lift this burden from your life. That I cannot fuels a belief that it's somehow my fault. Rightly or wrongly, this belief is “The Destroyer of Peace and Joy.” In your honor, I do battle each day, through the practice of fierce acceptance and gratitude for what is. Even, one day, perhaps coming to love what is.

And I love you equally as fiercely. You are my most courageous teacher, friend, and truth teller, and have my deepest respect, admiration...and yes, gratitude. Every victory brings another; carry it on!

Family is Where You Find It

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And when something good happens to me, she responds with, "That will never last."

Through their lack of understanding and acceptance, my family has left me feeling excluded and alone. That is why I must find others who are supportive and make my own family. Step Up on Second is a place where I feel accepted for who I am. I often tell people who are having the same pain and trouble as I have, that family is where you find it. Step Up on Second provides for me my new hearth and home, and here I know I am not alone.

A Family Interrupted and Reunited

disorder and schizophrenia. I felt like I was in a bubble, separated from the world around me. I would sometimes feel exuberant, but I would quickly fall into a deep depression. I felt slapped down. I did not understand myself or feel understood, especially by my family. I'm sure they tried to understand, but it was very difficult for them.

As time went on, we grew farther apart. My father mistreated me, and I grew tired of trying to make my family situation go right. I couldn't help but feel angry and bitter. In 1999, I moved to California from my hometown of Houston, Texas. The rift continued to grow, and eventually I decided to cut off all communication with my family.

After living with my illness for so long, often being confused, desperate, and homeless, I finally reached out for medical help. With regular trips to a psychiatrist, I made real progress. The fog lifted and I felt calm, centered, and focused. I also got permanent supportive housing at Step Up on Second, which stabilized my life even more. Despite the fact that I was feeling better and getting my life together, the break with my family continued.

In the fall of 2008, a huge hurricane hit Houston, causing extensive damage. My thoughts went to my family. I decided to make contact to be sure all was well. First, I called my younger brother. The phone was disconnected. My spirit dropped. I thought of calling my Uncle Henry whom I hadn't seen in over 12 years. He was a retired, soft-spoken Methodist minister who never had a bad word to say. I found his number on the Internet, called, and left a message.

Soon I received a call from him saying that all was well and he was glad to hear from me. Afterwards, we spoke from time to time. It wasn't unusual for us to spend two hours on the phone talking about "stuff."

In the summer of 2009, I received some bad news from

A Child's Rejection

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talked about our issues. I told him that I felt life was all about living and learning and I hoped we could find a way to understand one another better.

My son and I had a great talk. I now realize that though he is highly educated and successful, he has a lot to learn about mental illness. I also realize that he does care about me. Somehow, I got through to him and he is now willing to learn more about my illness.

He gave me his personal cell phone number and told me to call him any time. We are making good progress.

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my aunt: Uncle Henry had passed away. My aunt added that he always spoke well of me and that he was proud of me and my stability. She told me about my half brother, James, and what he was up to. James is about 30 years younger than me. I had always felt a special bond with him, but for years I was plagued by the feeling that I wasn't good enough to be a decent big brother. The last time I had seen him was 12 years earlier at a Boy Scout event where he received a special award. I remember him telling me that I was his "cool brother." That touched me deeply.

I told my aunt that if any family members wanted to get in touch with me, please give them my information, especially James. Four days later I received a call from James. We had a great talk. I told him that I felt bad that I was never the brother that I wanted to be and the brother he deserved. Without skipping a beat, he said, "It's never too late to start." And thus, a wonderful relationship began to grow.

I have since contacted and stayed in touch with other family members through Facebook. They all seemed happy to hear from me and know that I was well. Recently, James visited me here in Southern California. We had a great time and bonded even more. I was finally enjoying being a big brother.

On Father's Day, at the gentle advice of my girlfriend, I called my dad and wished him a happy Father's Day. I hadn't spoken to him in over 10 years. He seemed to take it really well. Although we spoke for only a minute, it was a huge step in my life.

I hope to become more connected with more family members in the future. It is good to see that the longstanding break with my family is beginning to mend. I'm sure it will take time, but my joy and happiness of seeing it happen is truly rewarding and healing.