



From your president

As a young mother I had all the hopes and dreams for my children just as any loving parent has. But early on I sensed that my first born son was different. As a child he was unable to sit still and had problems sleeping at night. In school he had trouble making friends, and had learning difficulties, even though he had a very high IQ. By the age of 12 he was in a residential treatment program. By the age of 16 he was diagnosed with schizophrenia. My first reaction was a sense of relief, to finally know there was a reason why my son was different. But my relief soon faded to despair, as we struggled to find help. Schizophrenia began to feel more like a sentence than a treatable brain disorder. The insurance quickly maxed out and we were left with no resources, and my son was spiraling into a world of psychosis. Over the years, he developed diabetes and Crohn's disease, and it became increasingly difficult to find help. The tragedy for our family was not in having a son diagnosed with schizophrenia, but rather in the lack of support, understanding, and access to treatment. Chances are if he had early intervention and access to appropriate treatment, he may not have become seriously disabled. Now, as an adult living with a disabling mental illness along with a host of medical problems, there are limited resources available, and this is the challenge we, and many other families are facing today. But this is not where my story ends, it's actually where it all began, and the reason I became involved in NAMI 23 years ago.

Having lived with mental illness in my family most of my life, I didn't begin to fully understand it until I found NAMI. NAMI opened the door to hope, awareness, and understanding, all in the comfort of a group of families with a big heart and a mission that was changing the face of mental illness across the nation. Words like crazy, nuts, or insane have no place in NAMI, for they could not begin to capture the reality and essence of having a loved diagnosed one serious brain disorder such as depression, bipolar, or schizophrenia. It is not uncommon for families to become immersed in the day to day challenges that we face with mental illness, and to feel a deep sense of sadness, shame, and hopelessness. Where do you find a caring listener, or a helping hand? How do you put a positive spin on your life struggles? Without sympathy and understanding, families carry a huge emotional burden.

In NAMI Support group, telling our personal stories becomes a healing experience, not only the individual who is sharing, but for each person who is listening. It helps to know that we are not alone, and one person's struggle may never seem as bad, after hearing someone else's. At the end of the evening we come away feeling stronger, and grateful that we have found hope & courage in the company of caring people who have been there and truly understand. There is no blaming or shaming, but a mutual respect and sincere compassion for what each of us has been through, and

how far we have come. Equally important, the free education courses NAMI provides help us learn healthy ways to cope and care for ourselves and our family, and offers the opportunity to connect with others who understand..

In NAMI, we learn to celebrate each day that our loved ones are stable and healthy, to role with the hard times, and stay focused on hope and understanding—that this too will pass. Each of our stories is unique, but we share a common bond, as well as a common vision: That people of all ages living with mental illness, no matter what their level of need— can access the treatment and support necessary to experience recovery. Though recovery may seem unattainable to the family or individual who is struggling in this moment, there is reason for hope, and it is often in the sharing of our stories that we find the courage and strength to keep on, and find a light of hope at the end of the tunnel.

Compassionate support, education, advocacy, referrals to community services and hands on experience are among the gifts that NAMI can offer you and your family. We welcome you to join us in our monthly support and education meetings, and take one of our free courses for families and/or individuals living with mental illness. NAMI has many opportunities to meet others and get involved in an organization that is truly making a difference for families like yours and mine. If you haven't already, consider becoming a member of NAMI to support our education and advocacy efforts, and sign up for email alerts of the important mental health issues that are being debated in our state and in our nation. Together we can change the future for those we love.