

NAMI - a safe harbor in a stormy world

By Jennifer L. Boen

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Twenty-five years ago in Fort Wayne, people with mental illnesses and their families had few professionals to turn to for help. Even if they did seek help, they feared mistreatment, misunderstanding and rejection by most everyone else.

One person, Phyllis Patton, whose son has schizophrenia, talked to her son's Park Center counselor about her need to connect with someone walking in the same shoes.

"I knew there had to be other parents out there," she said. A support group for single parents, Parents Without Partners, taught her the value of sharing with others and learning from their experiences. Thus was born the Fort Wayne Alliance for the Mentally Ill, now NAMI Fort Wayne, the first Indiana chapter of the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill.

Celebrating its 25th anniversary in September, NAMI has been a source of resource and respite for parents and spouses and a catalyst in the community for raising awareness about mental illness and improving the well-being of those diagnosed with it.

If it were not for NAMI, 51-year-old Chip Novak, diagnosed with schizophrenia in his 20s, would likely not have won the City Golf Championship on Monday.

If it were not for NAMI, Jo Rinard, who has bipolar illness, might not be providing hours of volunteer service at Carriage House, which provides job and life-skills training for people with mental illness. Carriage House, at 3327 Lake Ave., was founded in 1998 by NAMI and Park Center, a community mental health center.

If it were not for NAMI, Trevor Tozer, 35, who was diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia in 1985, might be living on the streets instead of independently, sharing a house with others with mental illness. He is regaining confidence and hope for the future while learning computer and other skills at Carriage House.

"We're your sister, your brother, your next-door neighbor, your pastor, your friend," Rinard said.

When Chip Novak was in the midst of his illness, unable to work, hospitalized and dealing with side effects of many different medications, it was NAMI that his mother, Jane Novak, turned to for help.

"I called them up and told them about Chip. They invited me to a support group, but I wasn't much for that kind of thing," Novak said. She tried one meeting, and has been involved since. It was there she found information such as which medications seemed effective and help for many other related issues.

"As we learned how to cope with each of our problems, we found answers and turned around and passed them on to others," Patton said.

After 20 years of work with NAMI, advocating on the local, state and national levels, Jane Novak was honored in 2001 by Park Center, which created an award in her name. The Jane Novak Award is bestowed on those in the community who have shown exemplary leadership and advocacy on behalf of the mentally ill. Fort Wayne Police Department Capt. Dottie Davis and Judge David Avery, two recipients of the award, worked alongside NAMI members to develop the department's Crisis Intervention Team. The training and work of the team has significantly reduced arrest rates and injuries of people with mental illness and expedited their access to appropriate treatment.

On behalf of NAMI, one of Chip and Jane Novak's proudest moments was the day he was granted a commercial truck driver's license in March 1999. He was the first person in Indiana with serious mental illness to write on the license application his diagnosis.

"I think it created quite a stir at the state," Jane Novak said. "It was a test case for NAMI and for us. A person with mental illness at the time felt he had to hide it. We'd been criticized for that and decided to be totally honest and above-board about everything.

His mental illness under control, Chip Novak had been working for SPS in Fort Wayne for several years but wanted to move up from driving a pickup in town to making deliveries in and out of state in a bigger truck. The application had to go before a Bureau of Motor Vehicles review board. The approval came.

State Sen. Tom Wyss of Fort Wayne credits NAMI for educating him and other state and national legislators.

"Because of NAMI, I gained 20 years of understanding of what mental illness is and what families go through instead of five years I would have learned on my own," he said. "The legislature understands these issues so much better, thanks to the people who have talked to us about their children and family members with mental illness."

Despite significant strides in acceptance, understanding and treatments of mental illness, much remains to be done, NAMI members say.

"There is still discrimination," Rinard said, noting she was let go of a factory job because of a lengthy stay in the hospital to get her illness under control. Tozer, too, said he was asked not to come back at a fast-food chain after missing work for treatment of his illness.

Finding the right doctor and the right medicines can be as difficult and complex as understanding the faulty chemistry of the brain that caused the illness in the first place, they say.

Insurance companies often put a cap on coverage of mental health services. "It used to be your average hospital stay was two weeks. Now the average stay is three days," said Carriage House executive director Andy Wilson. But the work of NAMI, including the strong support system of Carriage House and other services, has and is making a difference. "This is my safe haven. It is for all of us," Tozer said. "We just want to be treated as well as the next guy going down the street."

Get help

NAMI Fort Wayne provides support groups for those with mental illness and for their spouses, friends and families. The general support group meets 7-9 p.m. Tuesdays at Carriage House, 3327 Lake Ave. Education night featuring a speaker is the fourth Tuesday of every month. Membership dues are \$25 a year. For more information, call 447-8990.

Help NAMI help others

NAMI Fort Wayne is hosting the first fundraisers in the organization's 25-year history. The agency, housed at the League for the Blind & Disabled, lost its only paid employee when a part-time education director stepped down recently in an effort to save the agency money. But volunteers continue to field dozens of calls, and families consistently seek information on mental illness, said Kathy Bayes, president of NAMI. So a golf tournament and dinner featuring NAMI advocate David Kaczynski and the play "Voices Over," will be held in September, with all proceeds going to NAMI Fort Wayne.

◆**Chip Novak Open:** Sept. 15 at Brookwood Golf Club; cost is \$75 per player in the four-person scramble; sponsorship of a hole is \$200; call 749-0961 for reservations and more information.

◆**NAMI 25th Anniversary Dinner:** 6-9:30 p.m. Sept 27 at the Scottish Rite Auditorium, 431 W. Berry St. Cost is \$30 per person or a table of eight for \$240; reservations are required. Call 447-8990, or mail checks to NAMI Fort Wayne, PO Box 6143, Fort Wayne, IN 46896-0143.