

*LEGISLATIVE FORUM ON MENTAL HEALTH AND SCHOOL SUCCESS  
CREATING A SHARED AGENDA*

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**OCTOBER 9, 2003**

**Student Panel Testimony**

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*Rachel  
6<sup>th</sup> Grade  
Rocky River, Ohio*

My name is Rachel and I am 11 years old. I am in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade in Middle School. When I was in 4<sup>th</sup> grade, I was told I have Attention Deficit Disorder - the inattentive kind. I like school a lot. I like my teachers and learning new things. Art and Music are my favorite subjects. Regular schoolwork has been hard for me. I started having problems in school in the 1<sup>st</sup> grade. My teacher said that I did not pay attention or follow directions. I was having lots of problems with reading. I had been taking speech therapy since before I was in kindergarten and the teacher didn't know if my problems in reading were because of my speech problem, ADD or other problems. My mom and my teacher worked out a system where I earned stuff at home for paying attention and following directions in school. Someone then came to observe me at school. They had a meeting and decided to wait and see what happened in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade. Maybe I just needed to be older. My birthday is in August, so I am one of the youngest in my grade. I had a great year and teacher in Second Grade. In Third Grade, I went to a new school building and I started having problems again. I am taller than everyone in my grade and the kids would pick on me and call me names on the playground which made me mad. I didn't have many friends. My mother requested that the school test me to see if my not paying attention was related to my speech problem. It wasn't. I have been going to see a psychologist since I was very little because my parents are divorced. My psychologist gave me a test called the TOVA which is a computer test to see if my not paying attention in school was due to ADD or something else. I have ADD. I was glad to know what was different about me. Even after we knew what the problem was, the teachers at school had difficulty understanding the problems I was having. Once, for reading homework, we were supposed to write

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about a story that the teacher had read out loud. When I got home, I couldn't remember the story so I couldn't do the homework. The next day, my teacher wanted to know why I wasn't paying attention to the story. Another time, I asked my teacher for more time to finish a test - which I am allowed to do - and the teacher asked why she should give me more time. I had to tell her - in front of the whole class that I have ADD - then she asked if I had an IEP which gives me more time on tests. It was really embarrassing. There is this little box on my report card were the teacher initials if we pay attention in class, I never have that box initialed. Sometimes, when school work gets frustrating or I have had problems with kids in school, I have gone to the guidance counselor at school for a break and to talk, but she isn't always available. Some of the kids think I am not very smart because I don't always "get it" as quickly as they do and this bothers me. When I am really upset, I talk to my psychologist about school. It helps.

I have been on two different medications since I was diagnosed with ADD. The first one was Concerta. It was ok. Now I take Strattera, which is better. Having ADD is like being in a fog. I just can't focus at times. The medication helps me to think better and not have the fog. Last year I was really struggling in Social Studies, my Mom met with the school teachers and told them what we do at home to help me remember schoolwork. My teachers used some of those ideas. I ended 5<sup>th</sup> grade with 7 A's and 3 B's on my report card and I was really happy.

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Outside of school, I ice skate and have been in Singing Angels for 3 years. This year, I was promoted to the Performing Chorus from Training Chorus. I am so happy. None of the kids there know I have ADD. We all like each other and help each other out because we all have work hard together on our performance.

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*Megan  
11<sup>th</sup> Grade  
Delaware, Ohio*

Hello, my name is Megan Mason. I am 15 years old and I live with a secret; I have a mental illness. Its called Bipolar disorder. Bipolar is also called Manic Depression. I have extreme hyper days and really sad depressed days. My teenage years have been terrible. I have been diagnosed as attention deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, and panic and anxiety disorders. I have only shared my secret with my closest friends. I have lost my friends that I grew up with in elementary school. They didn't understand my illness, and neither did their parents.

Two years ago, when I was 13 years old I was diagnosed at Ohio State University Hospital. Wow, there was a name to what I was suffering from. You have no idea what it was like going to middle school. Every day was living torture. The harassment from other students was unending. Getting my medications adjusted and stabilized was a real roller coaster ride.

My family decided to find another way for me to get my education. For a year and a half, I had a private tutor and her name was Brenda Smith. We would talk every week on Friday but, I started to miss being around kids my own age.

My Mom had heard through a friend about an alternative education program called the Arts Academy. My Mom's friend's son attended this school and was very successful. My mom called Kim DiLuzio, she is the alternative education program coordinator for my school system. We had several meetings and decided that the Arts Academy might be helpful. The teachers are Mrs. Laura Cleveland and Mrs. Kim Roberts. They are the greatest teachers ever! They at least understand their students. When you have a problem they take time to talk to you. At the Art's Academy, you work at your own learning pace. I

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started out as a freshman and now am a junior. I will most likely finish my high School career early because I am able to learn quickly. Most of the students are like me- unique in their own special way.

I think the art projects we do are very therapeutic and a lot of fun too. I am very thankful to be a student at the Arts Academy.

I hope that other kids like me can have the opportunity that I have had in going to the Art's Academy. My teachers are a great help too. We are like a family at our school.

I have a great support system at home as well. I am very thankful for my family. They always take time out of their days to talk to me and they always encourage when I'm feeling down.

My psychiatrist, Dr. Christopher Hasseltine is awesome too. He has helped me so much during the past few years.

To bring my story to a close, please strongly consider continuing support for Alternative Education. For me it has meant a normal teenage life and school experience, and future to look forward to; hopefully, as a writer or an artist.

Thank you for letting me be a part of the Legislative Forum on Mental Health and School Success.

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*Buddy  
11<sup>th</sup> Grade  
Williamsburg, Ohio*

HOW MENTAL HEALTH HAS HELPED ME

There are many great things I can say about my schools mental health staff, they are kind to me and that does reassure me.

It helps me feel safe and cared about. I know they care, so I feel comfortable around them. Those are just a few things I can say about the mental health at my school. I've come to school many times totally stressed and distraught, but my friends (the mental health staff) at school really help me get emotionally and mentally ready to deal with the pressures of life and school. I'm not like most other kids, but one thing we all have in common is we all have issues sometimes. I have been at my worst days, being depressed and ready to just give up and throw my future away. Then I talk to Peggy or Julie and they talk to me like I'm a person they care about and not just a part of their job. There is one day that stands out to me more than any other. I came to school, I was really low, and I didn't want to talk to anybody, but Peggy came to my class and convinced me to go to her office to talk, so I did and about ten minutes later I was expressing feelings I had hidden away from the world. I told her about problems at home, with friends, girls and, myself. I told her how I planned to commit suicide. She talked to me for along time, and I can say she saved my life countless times. I never talked so much to anybody, not even my parents.

I felt like a new happier me.

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***Tova  
Graduated 2002  
Columbus, Ohio***

My first episode was at age 12 and in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade. I knew something was different about me and asked my mom for help. I told her that if she could not help me live then she must help me die. I was eventually hospitalized with Bipolar Disorder. One school administrator took the extra time with me. She understood because her husband also lived with a mental illness. I played basketball and made some great friends but one friend in particular helped me and became my rock.

The transition from middle to high school was difficult. I informed school staff of my mental health issues on a limited basis. Because of the stigma, I did not want to be labeled. My first year of high school was hard and the depression became too much. I tried to use basketball to motivate me, because it allowed me an out, but my illness consumed me. My mother and I came up with code words to let her know when I was in crisis. The words “Mississippi Burning” meant that I needed help now and I was not safe. If I called and asked her to take me fishing this meant that I was anxious or upset and needed to change my environment as soon as possible. She and I would go fishing over the telephone. I’d take deep breaths, imagine the cool water of the lake or river, I’d feel the wind blowing in the trees. Sometimes this would help me to refocus and I could make it through the day, but other times it did not. School became too much and my mom removed me. Family and friends helped me with my schoolwork and supported me wherever I needed it. Somewhere during this time my mom attended a class through NAMI, which helped her to better understand my mental health issues. She began to treat me differently. She later said she use to feel sorry for me. NAMI gave her the education, hope, and support she needed. She also says, “I got better when she got better.”

My life changed drastically in May 2000, my mom suffered an aneurysm and almost died. I thought, Oh God if my mom dies, I’ll have to die too. So, I planned my suicide. Slowly but surely she recovered while I lived with my grandfather. Another new school my 11<sup>th</sup> grade year, but this time there

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appeared to be a divine plan. From the principal, Mr. Johnson, to staff like Mrs. Jackson, Mr. Cheevers, and Mrs. Welch they all became my extend family. A listening ear, a stern voice of direction – with a little love attached, and most of all a warm smile that greeted me daily. I still became overwhelmed and anxious with school and life in general, but Mrs. Jackson and I made a safety plan. I could go to her classroom at any time and I emphasize any and sit in the back. I did not disturb her or her class. My mother taught me more about my illness. We read together and talked openly about what I was going through. So, I knew the signs when I became ill again. I confided in the school nurse, Mrs. Reynolds about my illness and that I was scared. She contacted my psychiatrist and my mom. The school nurse made the appointment and helped my mom to get me back on meds and therapy. Mrs. Reynolds even picked up my mom and me and attended my appointment. Periodically she'd check in with us to ensure things were well. I found out later her understanding of mental health issues came from her background in neurology. These supports helped me to have a great junior year.

My senior year changed and was somewhat harder – The school nurse left, my safe place changed. Though I played basketball and did well academically, I struggled mentally. The staff at East having some knowledge about mental health issues and embracing me in the manner they did helped so much.

The prognosis one psychiatrist gave my parents some years ago was one of little hope. He said I probably would not graduate from high school. My parents would have to care for me the rest of my life – Depressed, doped up, eczema covering most of my body, with no self-esteem. He told them in my presence that if he had his way he would remove me from our home and place me in residential care.

I, Tova LaNique Black-Durant did graduate Columbus East High School, Class 2002, and Scholar Athlete of the Year.

Thank You

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*Christian  
9<sup>th</sup> Grade  
South Bloomingville*

My name is Christian Johnson. I am 14 and I am the oldest of 5. There's me, my 13 year old sister, a 6 year old sister, 2 year old brother, and a 2 week old sister. We used to live in Savannah Georgia until we moved to Logan Ohio. In Savannah I had an abusive stepfather. My mom did not know about it.

Obviously she found out and divorced him. So I got put in Tricounty Mental Health. I go there every Friday to see my counselor. I've been going there for a year now and it has helped me in a lot of ways. It gave me someone else to talk to other than my family members. It's also convenient for me to go on Fridays because I can talk about all the stuff that happened that week. When I was being abused my grades were really low like C's and D's. I think this is because I was worried about what would happen when I got home and I didn't pay attention in class at school. After my stepfather stopped abusing us, I got better grades. After I started to see a counselor, it made me feel better about what happened. He used to call us really mean names, but my counselor has helped me to understand that it wasn't because we were bad or mean.

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*Kristin  
10<sup>th</sup> Grade  
Hudson, Ohio*

I started out my freshman year on top of the world. As a varsity track athlete and 4.0 student, I was happy with my life and thought nothing could go wrong with it. Days consisted of being transported back and forth from practice, inventing drama between friends and family, and being a typical teenage girl.

Then on March 12th of last year, I woke up to discover I was no longer living in a family of 5. I no longer had a brother. I no longer had that special someone to argue with over dinner, scope out my boyfriends, or ally against my parents when it was time to debate curfew. Why? Because my baby brother was in so much pain, he decided life wasn't worth it anymore. Because no one told him he could feel better, he didn't think he ever would. Because he didn't know he was sick, he didn't know he wasn't the freak of the family. Because he was suffering, all he could think of was how to end his pain.

My little brother left the world the same way he came in: he was figuratively and literally strangled to death by a disease and a society in denial of an illness that contributes to the third leading cause of death in the most powerful country in the world-suicide.

My little brother George was only 13 years old when he ended his short and sad life. I look at that time in days and hours, and wonder how much time was spent wishing he would die. I look at his attempts at self-medication through drugs and am filled with a defeating and devastating sense of sadness, the kind that weaves itself into every nook and cranny of your life and settles into the deepest, most vulnerable places in the abyss of a broken heart.

I look out at you, as a person, as a woman, as a suicide survivor. My time is not measured in hours or days, but in moments. The moments of happiness with my brother are few and far between. I look back and can barely remember his smile. My brain goes black at the sound of his sweet voice. But the moments that resurface are the ones I wish I could forget...The sounds of my parents sobbing deep into the night...The sounds of hushed tears at George's wake, attended by over 1000 people whom he did not even know cared.

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I stare out at you now as a damaged, yet eternally hopeful, human being. I open myself to each and every one of you because to do that, to have that intimate connection, is all that is in my power. Not by choice, but by circumstance, I exist in a tainted world far beyond my 15 years. The sadness in my heart is carried over into every word I say, every smile I fake, and every time I shed a tear.

And as a person standing here in front of you, I ask each and every one of you to take a stand. A revolution is about to take place. A change in pace. An about-face. There are others out there, who like me, recover from their losses. But even worse, there are others out there, like my brother, who appear to have nothing to be sad about, but underneath the cheery exteriors, hold death wishes, violent thoughts, and hopeless despair.

Ladies and gentleman, healthy people do not kill themselves. But in a world of stigma and stereotyping, this fact escapes many. A life-threatening disease may sometimes appear, at first, as a personality flaw or eccentricity. But depression is an illness, and without awareness, many suffer with their silent killers.

Our society needs to be educated so that mental illnesses receive the treatment they require. Schools, faculty, and students need to be aware of the symptoms of depression, and know that it is treatable. Society needs to erase the social stigma that hinders the sick from seeking treatment and being open about their disease. More funding is necessary for research, relief, and representation.

As a fellow human being, I ask each of you to take a stand. How many more children have to die before action is taken? People are suffering and lives are destroyed due to lack of awareness and treatment. We all know not to smoke cigarettes and to get screened for cancer, yet how many of us know that suicide is more prevalent than heart disease? Children, like my brother, are all around us, and need our help before they are lost to silent killers with an unfair advantage-ignorance. Programs such as Red Flags promote education and prevention. I will be working with Red Flags to continue this cause. I ask you to fight back with unity and valor, before that child is your own. The choice is yours. I have already made up my mind, and I am living for both myself and my brother now.

Thank you.