



Green Light Gala Helps to End Stigma Associated with Mental Illness

*More than \$135,000 raised for
National Alliance on Mental Illness.*

BY JENNIFER BROZAK

On June 1, 2013, siblings Libby Mascaro and Samuel Kane lost their mother, Mary Lou, to suicide. Mary Lou had battled bipolar disorder for 25 years, and had continually suffered from the stigma that often accompanies mental illness.

Following their mother's death, Mascaro and Kane pledged to use their tragic loss as a platform to help eradicate the fear and shame often tied to mental illnesses like schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, anxiety and depression.

"When she died, I vowed that I would help try to end the stigma associated with mental illness, because no single person should have to suffer not only from their actual illness, but also from the abandonment that can occur," says Mascaro, 39, of Upper St. Clair.

They channeled their determination into action. While at a National Alliance on Mental Illness conference in 2014, Mascaro asked if a gala had ever been held in Pittsburgh solely for mental health awareness.

"The general consensus was that there had not been one in Pittsburgh. So, we decided then and there we were going to do it," says Mascaro.

After a year of planning, Pittsburgh's first annual Green Light Gala was held on Dec. 1 at the Heinz History Center. The event's mission: to raise awareness that mental illness is both common and treatable, and to eliminate the stigma associated with the disease.

Nearly 300 people attended the gala, which was catered by the Common Plea. The nine-piece Move Makers Band provided entertainment, and a live auction was held for a painting donated by renowned Pittsburgh artist Johno Prascak. Mascaro and Kane co-chaired the event along with NAMI Southwestern PA board member Kathy Testoni.

"One of our goals was to create an atmosphere of fun and conversation, even though we were discussing a topic that is often hard to talk about," says Mascaro.

The gala raised approximately \$136,000 for NAMI.

"It was exactly what my sister and I had envisioned—a fun and light evening, centered around a very tough subject," adds Kane, 41, of Mt. Lebanon. "It was a time for us to see that our mother did not die in vain and that strides are being made to eradicate the archaic and unnecessary stigmas associated with mental illness."

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Approximately one in five adults—or nearly 20 percent of the U.S. population—suffer from some degree of mental illness, according to NAMI. Nearly 60 percent of those never seek treatment.

“I lived my life with [my mother] and her illness for many years and I saw the daily struggles she experienced,” says Mascaro. “I truly believe the stigma associated with mental illness is what killed my mother.”

Mascaro adds that she and her brother saw firsthand how people who suffer from mental illnesses don’t typically benefit from the same type of support those with physical illnesses receive. Her mother, a former nurse, struggled to maintain her job, as well as relationships with friends and family.

“No one sent her a card or flowers. No one brought her dinner or took her out to lunch. It was very hard to look at my mother, who was beautiful and kind, and think that she was sick,” she says. “My mother was incredibly kind and loving and sweet and smart. She was a nurse for many years and a grandmother who adored and loved her two children so very much.

“If she [had been] losing her hair or losing weight or fatigued and tired all the time and missing work because of a physical illness, the outcome would’ve been different. She would’ve been surrounded by friends and family. Everyone would comment on how strong she was for fighting an illness. She did not get any of that, simply because she had a mental illness.”

Her brother agrees, pointing out that mental illness can seem “foreign” to anyone who doesn’t have firsthand experience with it.



“Witnessing our mother’s treatment from the public and from some family and friends was almost as bad as dealing with the illness itself,” Kane says. “There is a terrible misconception that those with mental illnesses are weak or can ‘snap out of it’ if they want. It is deplorable.”

The Green Light Gala was a way to initiate a much-needed discussion about mental illness, according to the siblings.

“We would have been happy with a decent amount of money raised, but the most important thing was the people there who talked about mental illness and started the conversation,” says Mascaro. “I’ve had many people reach out to me and tell me how thankful they are for my brother and I being so open about our mother’s suicide and for having the gala. I know we’ve helped many people and it’s just the beginning.”

For more information about NAMI or to find help for mental illness, visit namiswpa.org. ■



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