

Deb Mahr - Introduction at the Annual NAMI La Crosse County Awards -
May 21, 2013 by Patti Jo Severson

Research supported by the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) has found that half of all lifetime cases of mental illness begin by age 14 and if left untreated can lead to a life-long disability of mental illness. Unfortunately, a decade or more can pass before individuals in this vulnerable population receive treatment. Social stigma and lack of healthcare access can further delay diagnosis and treatment. This is NOT news to many of our NAMI families.

In 2008, Todd and Deb Mahr, and their son Sam, initiated a "call to action" around this mental health crisis. Bringing together community partners, the Mahrs initiated the discussion and planning of a new mental health initiative in the La Crosse area. A major part of this initiative was revitalizing the La Crosse YMCA Teen Center and beginning a mental health outreach effort "Kaitlin's Table". The personal tragedy of their daughter Kaitlin's death has awakened and motivated them to see this initiative succeed. The Mental Health Coalition of the Greater La Crosse Area, NAMI of La Crosse County, Inc, Gundersen Health System & Foundation, and the La Crosse Community Foundation, are among the community partners included in this effort. As part of this initiative, with the generous support of the Mahr family, NAMI of La Crosse County launched two programs: NAMI Basics, and NAMI Parents and Teachers as Allies (NAMI PTasA). These programs target educators and parents of children and adolescents living with mental illness.

To date, NAMI Basics, a 6-week education program for families of children and adolescents affected by mental illness, has graduated 5 classes, with plans to offer future classes. The NAMI PTasA program, a two hour in-service for teachers, has been offered at most area schools, including all of the La Crosse Public Schools, Onalaska High School, Holmen High School, CESA 4 Educators Annual State Conference, and Coulee Region Christian Schools. Deb has been a part of nearly all of these presentations, and most recently, the 2013 NAMI Wisconsin Annual State Conference. Deb has also provided individual classroom presentations, and participated in several school health fairs. In addition, Deb was a guest panelist at the AMOS Community Conversation on Children and Mental Illness, at Viterbo University in May 2012.

Always, evaluations indicate that the most effective, meaningful part of the presentations are the personal stories, not the signs and symptoms of mental illness, but the personal stories of how mental illness has affected an individual and family. By sharing her story, Deb has touched the lives of many and helped all of us understand the impact of mental illness. She is an educator, a friend, an advocate, a partner, a mother, a champion, and a voice for many who may not be heard.

Deb Mahr is being honored for the 2013 NAMI Award, for her tireless work in helping to educate the community, and improve the chances that another child or adolescent will receive the help and support they need to succeed. It is an honor to present this award to Deb Mahr. Thank you for the work you do Deb!

NOTE: Deb Mahr was one of 6 individuals honored at the Annual NAMI La Crosse County Awards event. Deb joined La Crosse Police Captain Shawn Kudron; Jennifer Timm, La Crosse County Outpatient Mental Health and Substance Abuse Clinic; Cindy Brownell and Kathy Vongroven, NAMI Family-to-Family Educators and active NAMI members; Evonne Dundert, Peer Support Specialist at RAVE; and Riverfront, for services supporting individuals living with mental illness.