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Bridgewater teen recognized for work bringing mental-health issues to forefront

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Staff Writer

At an age when pimples and popularity could be enough to send someone into a self-esteem spin cycle, Caitlin Carey is committed to discussing her mental-health issues and providing a resource for others to fight their stigma.

Carey, 17, of Bridgewater is the creator of <http://stepoutofthesilence.org>, a forum for teenagers with any kind of mental-health issues. Her efforts are one reason why Caitlyn will be honored Dec. 8 as the Young Entrepreneur of the Year at the Somerset County Business Partnership Awards ceremony.

Dianne Durland, who headed the Somerset County Business Partnership Selection Committee, said the Young Entrepreneur Award is modeled after the Rotary Club, since the recipient also wins a scholarship.

"The Rotary motto is 'Service above self.' (Carey) brought that out more than the other participants," said Durland, a vice president at Community First Bank in Franklin (Somerset).

Durland said that while there were many motivated entrepreneur applicants - including landscapers, jewelry makers and chefs - Carey's idea was unique and she is a one-woman operation.

FINDING SUPPORT

Before Carey created the Web site, her obsessive-compulsive disorder had been an isolated struggle. She washed her hands until her fingers were raw, repeated endless prayers in her head and was paralyzed with fear about making mistakes on school tests.

Carey, a senior at Bridgewater-Raritan High School, sought help in 2006 through medication and therapy. She tried to find a support group, but most were for adults or very young children. The only one for teens with mental illness was in Jersey City - and at the time, she didn't have a driver's license. So she went online and again was frustrated by her limited options.

That's when Carey decided to start her own forum, <http://stepoutofthesilence.org>, and a nonprofit organization. She launched the effort in September 2007 to coincide with National Suicide Prevention Week. The Web site allows youth to express themselves with artwork, prose, photography, graphic art and dialogue.

HELPFUL RESOURCE

Theodore Petti, who specializes in child and adolescent psychiatry at Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital - UMDNJ and at the Children's Hospital, said it's wonderful that Carey created what he called a positive and safe place online for teens to share their thoughts and experiences.

Petti and practitioners in his field often suggest teens join support groups whenever possible, so that they break out of the isolation of mental illness. Petti said that while therapy and medication often helps those suffering with depression and other mental illnesses, some other aspects linger, such as feelings of helplessness and self-degradation. Sharing those feelings with those who have been there can help, he said.

Since the creation of the Web site, and Carey's very public discussion of her own struggles with obsessive-compulsive disorder, most of her peers have been positive, she said. Carey said she's had a few negative comments, but she knows she's on the right track in helping people like herself.

Since creating her Web site, she has attracted 251 members. The site also has tallied 25,000 visitors.

Tina Carey applauds her daughter's bravery and generosity of spirit.

"It's wonderful to start the dialogue (about mental illness) and that's what she did," Tina Carey said.

EARLY DIAGNOSIS

Caitlin's parents, Tom and Tina Carey, first noticed their daughter's obsessive-compulsive behavior when she was about 6. After a series of strep-throat infections, she became germ-phobic and started washing her hands repeatedly.

During her years in Catholic school, from ages 7-12, Carey's obsessive-compulsive disorder manifested itself in prayers. The repetition of prayers would begin with a morning prayer, but Carey soon worried that her prayer wasn't good enough.

So she'd do it again and again, repeating Hail Marys as many as 200 times silently to herself throughout the day. The cycle would again begin during evening prayers, which Carey would start at bedtime and continue for hours into the night.

Carey, who has always been an A-student, asked her parents to attend Bridgewater-Raritan Regional High School because she wanted the academic challenge. While she's done well and has enrolled in several Advanced Placement courses, Carey became obsessive about schoolwork. She began reviewing her assignments into the night. When she made a mistake or two on tests, she would become paralyzed with anxiety, sometimes so much so that she would stay home from school.

Anxiety and obsessions still pop into her head, but it's a lot easier for her to quell them, Carey said. Medication helps, and she receives extra time on tests and uses other coping exercises to get out of a cycle.

Carey's Web site also has led to several public speaking engagements for her about the teen experience of mental illness. In October, she made a presentation at the New York State Mental Health Symposium in Albany.

"She's this tiny little thing in this room full of adults," Tina Carey said. "At the end of her speech everyone was on their feet."

While Caitlin's current focus is finishing her college applications to may top-tier schools, when that process is over, she will seek grants to expand her Web site's reach and impact.

Additional Facts

BEST IN BUSINESS

WHO: Somerset County Business Partnership.

WHAT: The organization's 2008 Outstanding Business Person and Economic Vitality awards reception and luncheon.

WHEN: 11 a.m. Monday, Dec. 8.

WHERE: Bridgewater Marriott, 700 Commons Way.

HOW MUCH: \$85 for members and \$135 for nonmembers.

MORE INFO: Reservations can be made by calling 908-218-4300 or e-mailing event@scbp.org.

ONGOING SERIES: Continue reading daily profiles of this year's winners through Friday, Dec. 5, here at MyCentralJersey.com.

ON THE WEB: <http://stepoutofthesilence.org>
