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### Bringing mental health issues out of shadows through Somerset YMCA *Residents share stories to highlight awareness*

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Editor's note: The information in the following story was provided to this newspaper by The Somerset Hills YMCA in Basking Ridge.

**BERNARDS TWP.** – More than 30 mental health experts will speak during Mental Health Week, a community education and awareness event sponsored by the Healthy Outcomes Partnership (HOP) that begins Monday, May 10.

Among them is Dr. Gail Giacalone, who will talk about "Coping with Loss and Grief" at 9:30 a.m. Tuesday, May 11, in the multipurpose room at the Somerset Hills YMCA, 140 Mount Airy Road, Basking Ridge.

Giacalone is the grief therapist of Basking Ridge resident Bill Kimzey, who suffered an unspeakable tragedy Aug. 4, 2006, when his 12-year-old son, Jack, was killed at his home.

Kimzey's wife, Denise, was subsequently found innocent by reason of insanity of first-degree murder. She remains in Trenton Psychiatric Hospital.

Bill Kimzey has since devoted his time to creating awareness of mental illness and to stripping away its inherent stigma.

He is a driving force behind HOP, an initiative of the YMCA. He also edits a blog, [www.bernardsvoices.org](http://www.bernardsvoices.org), that includes in-depth discussion on mental-health issues.

Kimzey speaks candidly about his life since that tragic day to encourage others to reach out for help before it's too late.

"I come at the issue of mental-health awareness from three points of view: the spouse of a woman who went crazy, then as a client of grief therapy for three-and-a-half years, and as a father of a college-age daughter suffering from grief and anxiety," he said. "I focus my awareness campaign on tackling the issue of making that first call for help as easy as possible to make.

"Like any disease, you want to catch it before it becomes acute, before the EMT is in your driveway."

'Needed Help'

Kimzey said he decided to seek grief therapy because he faced a "crisis."

"I did not know how I was going to face the next couple of hours, much less the next day," he said. "And I also didn't know how I was going to help my daughter.

"I didn't know what kind of help I needed, but I knew I needed help."

Kimzey said he initially called his general practitioner but he was out of town.

"His service took the call," he said. "He had Dr. Gail Giacalone call me within hours, an action very unusual for Gail to take.

"In the beginning, I often saw her twice a week," he said. "For three years, I went weekly, taking breaks only occasionally. Now I go twice a month."

He went on to explain what grief therapy provides.

"Gail is steadfast, reliable. She cares about me," he said. "I can send her an email and call her. She is there."

'She Isn't A Friend'

He also said she is consistent and disciplined.

"She has both the big picture, and the minute-by-minute, hour-by-hour picture," he said. "I don't have to trade time - where she pours her heart out to me, then I pour my heart out to her. She isn't a friend."

"There are a lot of rules of thumb that she helped me work out," he said. "Every one experiences grief differently, his own way, in his own time. So, in my case, I knew that not only would my daughter and I grieve in our own ways, but also my sisters, my closest friends, Jack's friends, neighbors; people I run into at the grocery store would have their own grief, not a shared experience with me."

"Grief comes in waves," he continued. "When the wave hits, let it wash over you. You can't stand down at Sandy Hook in the breaking surf and force the wave to subside, to pass you by without drenching you. But with those waves are also shock, chaotic thinking, and emotional turmoil. These are all symptoms, expected symptoms."

"Grief is normal," he explained. "Grief isn't an illness, but grief can go wrong."

'Brutally Blunt'

Dr. Giacalone also had Kimzey visit a psychiatrist.

"I used to share the prejudices and negativity many people have about taking anti-anxiety or anti-depressant medication," he said. "So did my wife. But as a society, we will take penicillin. We will take an ibuprofen. We will take a cholesterol drug, a heart-disease pill. Why are we so nervous about psycho-active meds?"

"The psychiatrist was male, and Gail, female," he continued. "Gender differences in my particular case were quite useful."

"My psychiatrist was blunt - often brutally blunt. Gail wanted me to go through my son's medical examiner/toxicology report with the psychiatrist. Gail didn't want lingering questions, lingering land mines out there to be tripped on 10 years in the future."

"She wanted me to go through stuff now, when I was under her watchful care," he said. "So my psychiatrist and I did that together."

"Maybe there were things I was willing to hear from a male doctor and not from a female," he said. "He used the 'murder' word often, in a couple of sessions. He pushed me."

No Timeline

Kimzey said there is no "timeline" for how long grief lasts.

"Yes, I am still grieving, but the waves break less frequently," he said.

Kimzey is now writing a memoir, poetry and editing a blog.

He said that working with others has been helpful.

"Working with the YMCA and the HOP has been good for me," he said. "We're doing some very good things, and I'm very optimistic that we will be making a significant contribution to our community's health and awareness."

"I encourage every one to come to Mental Health Week, to join the conversation," he concluded.

### Mom With A Mission

Former Gladstone resident Barbara Barisonek lost her 21-year-old son, Kenneth, "Duke," a Delbarton School graduate, to suicide in April 1996.

She was referred to Maureen Underwood, a licensed clinical social worker in Somerville.

Underwood is an expert in suicide prevention, headed the State Adolescent Suicide Prevention Project for 15 years and, with Scott Fritz, helped found the Society for the Prevention of Teen Suicide, whose focus is engaging schools in identifying kids at risk.

Underwood and Fritz will also speak during Mental Health Week, addressing "Challenges for Today's Children: Bullying and Suicide" at 6:45 p.m. Monday, May 10, in the YMCA's multipurpose room.

Barisonek, who now lives in Mendham Township, is known as "a parent survivor" of her son.

In the days that followed Duke's death, Barisonek, her husband, Larry, and elder son, Steve, received amazing support from family, friends, the Delbarton community, co-workers and even strangers.

To this day, Barisonek starts her day by reading a few pages of a book, sent to her by a stranger, that she has found incredibly supportive.

After about two years, when Barisonek and her family had begun to make great strides in the healing process, she felt strong enough to begin looking for the answers to those questions she had harbored since the day of the tragedy.

She also made a commitment that some good had to come from her experience.

What she discovered has been the incentive to create a teaching module geared to medical students to help them identify and diagnose the warning signs of those who are crying out for help.

Working with institutes such as the University of Medicine & Dentistry of New Jersey – University Behavioral Healthcare, the Institute for Quality, Research and Training and Robert Wood Johnson Medical School, Barisonek put together presentations that, as she put it, "put flesh, blood, warmth and tears on cold statistics and risk factors."

Barisonek makes it a point to talk about three key issues:

- Mental illness can happen to anyone, regardless of family circumstances, financial status, successes or failures;
- There is an urgent need to talk more about depression and bring it out of the darkness so parents, educators and medical professionals will be more equipped to recognize and address it;
- As with a broken arm or sickness, people should feel comfortable discussing the disease and seeking recommendations for good medical professionals to help them.

### 'Educate Ourselves'

"My journey of discovery over these years has led me to realize that, had I known more then, I could and would have done things differently," Barisonek said. "Would that have ultimately saved Duke's life? I don't know.

"But one thing I do know is that we need to educate ourselves more about what the warning signs are, particularly around times of great change, such as when your kids go off to college.

"I feel the high schools, for example, should be teaching parents more about what to look out for," she said. "We spend so much time instructing the kids and parents about college applications and admissions, yet omit to discuss life-and-death issues of depression and stress.

"Are they eating properly and gaining or losing too much weight? Are they sleeping properly? Is there alcohol abuse involved?"

"Duke was a popular, athletic, high-achieving 21-year-old who seemed to have the world by the tail," she added. "We just didn't see this coming until it was too late."

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