



# MENTAL HEALTH ASSOCIATION

Updates and information from the Atlantic County Office

April is Stress Awareness Month, Volunteer Appreciation, Therapy Dog Recognition and Alcohol Screening Month

## An Irish Mother's Love and Her Long Journey to Acceptance

*She traced her son's 20-year struggle with mental illness to family history and genetics*

**BY Beth Wade**  
**Public Relations Specialist**

Carried in the big and broken heart of this Irish mother are memories of her firstborn son who was exceptionally pretty with blue eyes and curly blonde hair. As a boy, he loved Pokémon. She fondly recalls Danny's good nature – sweet, helpful, generous and kind. And, over the years, he revealed a variety of gifts, self-taught at piano and able to build his own computer.

One part of his childhood stands out, though, and sometimes nags her. It's the memory of a school field trip when a Catholic third grade teacher suggested that Danny be "checked."

The suggestion went no further than that. Ellen can't turn back time and see what would have happened if she had pursued testing. That's a fact that she's accepted, along with who he is now – a "thirty-something" man living with bipolar disorder and schizophrenia, well known to police and the mental health system, in particular the hospital crisis unit.

Looking back, she says, "I always knew something was there. I didn't know what it was."

*I always knew something was there. I didn't know what it was.*

His struggle with mental health ramped up in high school with fits of teenage rage. She arranged for a therapist to work with him. Working full time and raising Danny and his sister by herself after a divorce was hard. Danny was using marijuana and skipping school regularly – eventually he dropped out. (continued on p. 2)

### INSIDE THIS ISSUE

**A Tribute to Our Volunteers**

**A Laughing Matter**  
Why this universal experience relates to wellness

**Keeping your Cool**  
Stress Awareness and why it matters

**Doggone Special**  
How dog/handler teams serve locally and nationally





At home his relationship with his mother and sister suffered, in great part due to hallucinations and paranoia. One night he banged on his sister's door, accusing her of being in the room with a boy. Regular and escalating rage was so scary for Ellen's daughter that she'd often ask her mother to put him out. Ellen resisted for a long time until one incident shook her very deeply.

"He texted his dad he'd killed me," she remembers.

After that, she saw no other choice. At a homeless teen shelter in Atlantic City, he did well for about 3 years, then he was kicked out for fighting with peers and arguing with staff.

He stayed with his father and stepmother for a short time, which abruptly ended when he and his friends damaged the apartment following a night of partying.

Danny held a job for more than 10 years as a gas attendant. He liked the job, the stability and consistency. That changed on one particularly bad day. She recalls he'd gone to the police station about a dozen times with complaints unknown to her. Police arrived at home to pick him up with members of the hospital crisis unit, but he'd gone to work.

of wild conspiracy theories including drones and black cars that follow him, the electric grid that delivers shocks to him, and a microphone that he believes was implanted during oral surgery. Though she can't be sure, she believes this torment caused him to damage several of his own teeth.

In all, she estimates the police have been to her house around 30 times over the years. There were many hospitalizations (nearly a dozen) and some helpful supports, with the exception of one. An acute psychiatric care hospital discharged him to a hotel in Camden, which is two hours away from home and completely unfamiliar to him. His case manager called Ellen to bring him clothes and shoes. After that week, he called family saying he was homeless on the streets.

Though he was ultimately relocated to Atlantic County, his housing in a dangerous neighborhood troubled him and his family. At that point, relatives took him in. The agreement: he could stay on the couch for a little while if he took his medicine faithfully. This short-term plan turned into years, explained Ellen. They live in the unit below Ellen, so she sees him regularly.

Ellen thinks that supported housing – such as a setting with a group of male peers – would have been ideal for Danny. He did well in a sober living arrangement at one time, but he was required to go to AA meetings where he felt he didn't fit in. Other housing arrangements failed because he smoked marijuana and couldn't pass a drug test.

"This is where I think the system is broken – when he comes home. He's an adult with mental illness and needs medication. He promises [he'll take it], but we can't make him. We need more help," she said.

Sometimes the younger, helpful and kind Danny that she remembers does surface and shine despite his illnesses. There's a bit of heartbreak in her voice as she tells a story of a recent Christmas when he unexpectedly reached out to his estranged sister through his mother with a thoughtful gift.

"She smiled when I gave it to her, but she's still afraid of him," said Ellen. "She visits me only when he's in the hospital and she's sure he's not here.

When police arrived at his job, Danny was agitated and threw an empty soda can at law enforcement. Though police were aware of his mental illness, one officer chose to file charges. She worries that the charges against him will prevent him from getting another job, cause him to be arrested, or jailed.

The ensuing one-month hospitalization led his employer to replace him. In her mind, he might have kept his long-time job had that day gone differently.

"I wish they hadn't gone to his job," she said. "The charges make a bigger headache – paperwork, fear, fines," she said. "It all seems unnecessary."

For the most part, Danny has been stable when he takes his medication regularly. Sometimes he does, other times he doesn't. In a perfect world, she thinks a court-ordered requirement for Danny to take his medicine might have helped.

His fascination and near addiction to the Internet often causes him agitation to the point of obsession. At times, he stays awake all night, occasionally for days. He's called local police, state police, Coast Guard, and FBI with complaints

The pattern of ill family members, mainly males, can be traced to his father's side of the family back to several generations – uncles struggled, a niece, and a cousin who tragically completed suicide at age 28.

"After I had a son like this, I can see it in others," she said. "I think it's hereditary. I believe it."

One study claims that some people with Irish heritage are actually at a higher risk for two specific illnesses. Researchers found a genetic mutation among some Irish people that increases the risk of developing schizophrenia or bipolar disorder more than ten-fold. (The study was published in an international peer-reviewed journal, Human Molecular Genetic.)

Though she knows of no correlation to her Irish lineage, she is sure that something is in his genes.

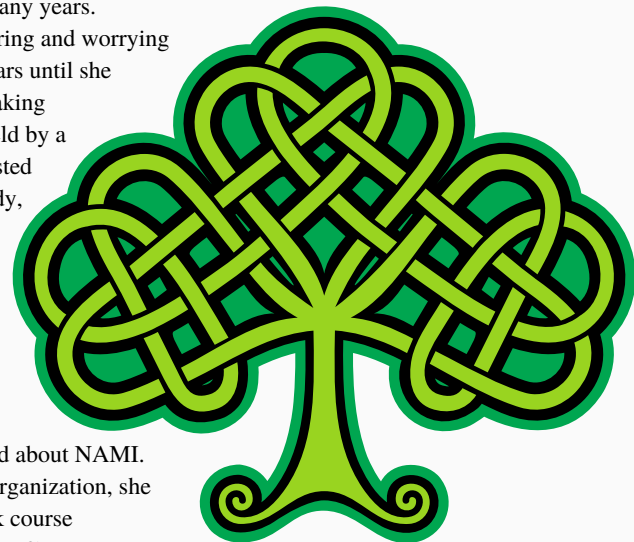
On Ellen's side, alcohol abuse runs in the family. Ellen overcame her addiction to alcohol, a habit she tried hard to hide from her son and daughter for many years.

Ellen's suffering and worrying went on for years until she attended a speaking engagement held by a church that hosted Patrick Kennedy, an advocate for those with mental health and substance use disorders.

On that day, she first learned about NAMI. Through that organization, she took a 12-week course

(continued on p. 3)

*'This is where I think the system is broken - when he comes home. He's an adult with mental illness and needs medication. He promises [he'll take it], but we can't make him. We need more help.'*



called Family-to-Family which helped her understand Danny’s illness and healthier, helpful ways to respond to him.

“I always thought I was the only one, but I met other parents who were going through the same thing,” she recalls.

Through NAMI, she later learned about the Intensive Family Support Services program (offered here at MHA Atlantic).

“Linda [Bastedo] has really helped me. She makes sure I’m taking care of myself, and I’ve learned ways to cope with my son. I appreciate her call every week because I can get depressed,” she said.

Ellen says she reads a copy of the Serenity Prayer often and that’s a great source of comfort. She prays for Danny regularly – mostly that he gets the help he needs.

She finds peace of mind in knowing that family members ensure Danny stay safe. He has at least one good friend in the neighborhood who plays music with him. He’s had girlfriends, she recalls. The most serious one left him for his best friend. Ellen says she’s saddened at times that he may never marry or know the joy of being a father.

“I’ve had a lot of time to accept things,” she said. “This has been going on for 20 years. Acceptance makes it easier for me. It took me a while to get here, but I did.” ■

*The names in this story have been changed to protect their privacy. If you or someone you know would like more information about our IFSS program, please call 609-517-8614.*

*Throughout the year, we will share stories of families and consumers in order to shine a light on their journey towards recovery. We will rejoice in the celebration of their successes. We’ll also reveal the challenges that exist for those families trying to access care for a loved one who does not recognize they have a mental health or substance use disorder, and how the current mental health system of care responds in these situations. We hope this series increases awareness, fosters compassion and improves outcomes.*

# You are not alone

**1 in 5 Americans live with a mental health disorder  
Support is available to help family members of those  
with mental health challenges**

- Personal advocacy
  - Systems navigation
  - Information
  - Resources
  - Support (one-to-one and group options)
  - Designated call line for those in crisis
- No insurance/no cost*



## We can help

The Intensive Family Support Service Program provides virtual groups

**Daytime groups:** second and fourth Thursdays 10am-12pm via Zoom  
Meeting ID: 840 9440 3617  
Passcode: 188143

**Evening group:** third Thursday 7pm-8pm Via Zoom  
Meeting ID: 871 5646 7403  
Passcode: 802729

**Call 609.517.8614 for more information**



**See page 9  
for more family  
resources,  
including call  
lines and groups**

# April is Volunteer Appreciation Month

*With gratitude for their service, we recognize all the great volunteers who make a difference to the individuals in our programs*

*Audrey Reppert - co-facilitates "The Journaling Journey"*

*Chantele Olivo - Rediscovering You Through Vital Wellness group facilitator*

*Chelsea Kowal - Cofacilitates Depression Support Group and Coping With Chaos; Facilitates Healing Connections and Reducing Relapses*

*Devon Dorso - Facilitates Unapologetically Me and a Depression and Anxiety Support Group.*

*Grey Cubano - Adult Survivors of Child Abuse group facilitator*

*Kris Auble - "Eating Disorders and Disordered Eating" and "Life in Waves" group facilitator*

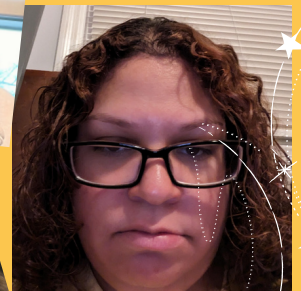
*Krista Opoku-Ware facilitates "The Sky's The Limit"*

*Ryan J - "Money Talks" and "Bipolar Group" group facilitator*

*Linda's Hats for Hope and all the associated knitters*

*Women in Mission with St. Andrews By the Sea Lutheran Church, AC*

*Girls Scout Troops #10128, #10137, #11068, and #11057*



Pictured are: Krista, Devon, Chelsea, Linda, Kris, Grey, Chantelle, Audrey, and Women in Mission

# A Laughing Matter

*Behind belly laughs & being silly -- how this universal human experience is connected to wellness*

Sure, we all know laughter feels good - except for the cramping we experience from the occasional side stitch. The exact reasons why it's "good" for you might be as elusive as first prize in your local town's trivia contest. Read on to score future points...

We often associate laughter with our abdomen, but just north of there -- in the heart -- something pretty cool is happening.

Laughter actually activates and then cools down the stress response (by increasing, then decreasing your heart rate and blood pressure).

And, then guess what...

That induces relaxation. According to one estimate, laughter can relax the body for up to 45 minutes.

The mind-body connection doesn't end there.

Laughter causes a decrease in the production of stress hormones, and increases endorphins (responsible for feelings of pleasure).

Among the many mental health benefits associated with laughter are: improves mood, strengthens resilience, adds joy to life & eases anxiety and depression.

"International Laughter Day" is a holiday set aside to remind us of the importance of this universally understood human experience. The person who designated the day, Izzy Gesell, is a Psychologist and motivational humorist. Yep, a psychologist! In addition to laughter, he's a big proponent of imagination and playfulness.

Maybe we do need a day to celebrate laughter, especially given the events of recent years. Thank you, Izzy Gesell, for the reminder. (Seriously)



— “ —

Laughter comes right after breathing as just about the healthiest thing you can do.

Izzy Gesell  
Psychologist and  
Founder of Laughter Day

— ” —

Go to a comedy club or watch funny outtakes online

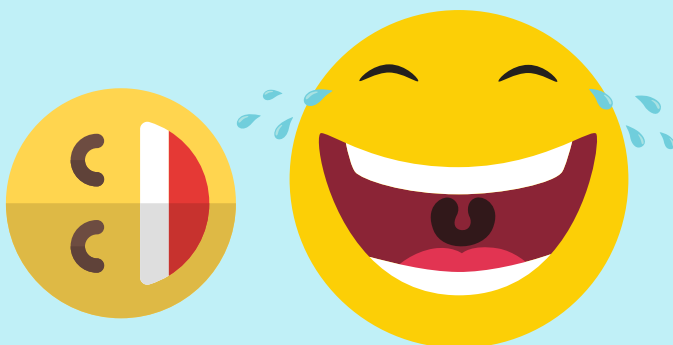
Host a game night

Play with a pet or search online for cute animal videos

Moment of  
Laughter Day is  
Friday, April 14

Watch a funny movie, show, or indulge in something amusing on YouTube

Plan a fun activity like mini-golf, bowling, or karaoke



# *Your donations allow us to help other families in Atlantic County*

## MHANJ'S WALK FOR WELLNESS & RECOVERY

Boardwalk fun for  
individuals & family  
members of all ages,  
including the dog!



June 10, 2023  
Nomahegan  
Park,  
Cranford, NJ

Festivities begin at 8:30  
am and the walk begins  
at 10:30 am.

**Join Team  
Atlantic or  
support us by  
donating to our  
team!**

<https://www.classy.org/give/t492338/#!/donation/checkout>

# *Planned Giving*

## **How You Benefit from Planned Giving**

Planned gifts are charitable contributions that are part of  
your financial or estate plans.

Including a gift to the

**Mental Health Association -Atlantic County**

in your will or trust allows you to create a legacy which  
provides families like you with the education, support,  
empathy and options to provide the best care for your family.

It only takes 20 minutes or less.

### **You Get to Leave a Legacy**

Making a bequest in your will is a  
powerful way to leave a lasting impact.  
Another way to leave a large gift is  
through establishing your legacy by  
making a bequest, showing your  
support for years to come.

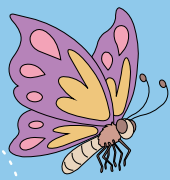
### **You Get a Tax Break**

Did you know that bequests can  
reduce federal estate taxes for  
heirs? And these deductions are not  
limited to cash — they can include  
assets like real estate, IRAs, and  
stock as well!

### **Decide How Your Gift is Used**

When you leave a bequest in your  
will to Mental Health Association  
in Atlantic County, you can  
allocate a program where you  
would like to make an impact.





# Wellness Bulletin Board



## At the Library

**The Ukraine Crisis: The Current Situation and its Historical Origins**  
Thurs., April 20 at 7 pm - Somers Point Branch

**Starting a Side Hustle** Sat., April 22 at 2 pm - EHT Branch

**Birding Basics with NJ Audubon**  
Saturday, April 29 at 10 am - Pleasantville Branch

See the full calendar online!  
[atlanticlibrary.org](http://atlanticlibrary.org) click on  
*At the Library*, then *Calendar*  
Chess Playing Days, Crochet Clubs,  
Computer Help, Book Clubs and more...



## Theater at Stockton

- Agatha Christie And Then There Were None
- Emerging Choreographers
- NEWSical The Musical
- Ed Vezinno and the Jim Ward Big Band
- Tri-Choir Concert

Details on [stockton.edu/pac/](http://stockton.edu/pac/) or 609-652-9000

*Keep*  
**Earth Day**  
ACUA's Annual Earth Day Festival  
Sunday, April 23th 10am - 4pm  
ACUA's Environmental Park  
6700 Delilah Rd. in EHT  
A fun day for all ages!

## Model Train Show

Sat., April 22 10 am to 4 pm

Sun., April 23 10 am to 3 pm  
at 4-H

Egg Harbor City

Free event





# KEEPING YOUR COOL

## April is Stress Awareness Month

### A Few Fast Facts

Thank your hypothalamus for stress! Some stress is good. Called eustress, this feeling motivates people (think "get out of the way of danger" and rollercoaster excitement)

Blame your hypothalamus for stress! It sends signals throughout the nervous system and to the kidneys that release stress hormones of adrenaline and cortisol.

Why do I feel hot when I'm stressed? A rise in blood pressure causes this. Follow up to feeling hot is sweating.

Stress can cause "brain fog," which can make it difficult to make decisions.

Research connects skin health to stress. High stress can trigger the release of hormones and sebum, both cause acne

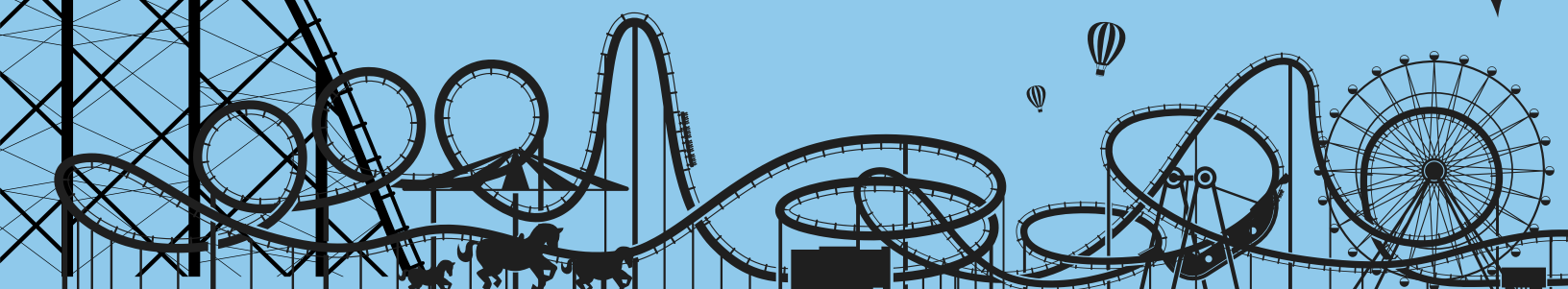
Stress hormones make it difficult for the brain to create new memories. Chronic stress can lead to a smaller hippocampus, which is the memory part of the brain.

Having support relieves stress. (And conversely, lack of support makes stress worse.)

### Tips for reducing stress!

- Diaphragmatic breathing (inhale through nose, pause while contracting abdomen, exhale mouth)
- Progressive muscle relaxation. Start at your feet. Tense muscles, then relax
- Check in with yourself! Name the feeling. Notice thoughts and emotions, then pause to slow down or stop the fight/flight response
- Meditation and mindfulness. These can help you see the situation in a different way & gain a new perspective.
- Create some space between yourself and the stress. Think about or focus on something else.
- Do something that brings you joy

See page 4  
for groups that  
reduce stress





## MHA - Acute Care Family Program

Support and assistance for families with a loved one in crisis and in need of linkage to treatment and other services.

**7 days per week  
Available 8 am to 8 pm  
609-517-8614**

Our team engages families who are often navigating the mental health system for the first time. Staff educate families about mental illness and offer resources and referrals that can help their loved one

### When your family needs help...



**we are a phone call away  
609-517-8614**

## NAMI Hosts Monthly Support Groups in Somers Point

**NAMI Family Support is a support group for adults (18+) with a loved one with a mental health condition. Participants gain insight from the challenges and successes of others facing similar experiences in an empathetic and supportive environment. Register online at [namiacm.org](http://namiacm.org) or call (609) 741-5125.**

**Meeting held the 2nd Monday of the month in St. Joseph's Catholic Church, 606 Shore Road, Somers Point, 7 to 8:30 p.m.**

## Peer Run Support Groups



United By Wellness (UBW) is a virtual wellness center where peers offer hope and skills for recovery to people living with mental illness and/or substance use disorder. This is accomplished by providing support, education and advocacy in a safe, and diverse community which embraces the uniqueness of its members and their chosen path toward recovery.

United By Wellness Center is a virtual center designed to engage all members to promote a sense of commonality... purpose...unity. Within the umbrella of the UBW community, members will be able to explore sub-communities for engagement depending on their interests or needs.

**Join United By Wellness at  
<https://mhaac.info/ubw-how-to-join.html>  
More than 30 weekly groups offered**

---

***Your NAMI Connection* is a recovery support group for adults (18+) who have experienced symptoms of a mental health condition or a dual diagnosis. Participants gain the support of peers who understand their experience and gain insight into others' challenges and successes.  
(See NAMI above for date/time/location)**

# Making a Pawsitive Impact

Dog Therapy  
Appreciation Day is  
April 11



We are proud to recognize our community partners, Tri-State K-9 Response Team. Members of this all-volunteer organization do great work all around the country with individuals, families, schools, neighborhoods, and communities that are in crisis. They also provide emotional support to First Responders and survivors of disaster or violence. Locally, they support our CIT (Crisis Intervention Team) by teaching Question, Persuade, Refer, which is a suicide prevention training. During CIT, they bring their certified therapy dogs called CIT Ambassador Dogs. Their presence during the training is helpful especially during discussions of sensitive subject matter.

*THANK YOU!*



To support the great work of  
Tri-State Canine Response, you can  
use the link below:

<https://tri-statecanineresponse.org/Ways-to-Sponsor>