



MENTAL HEALTH ASSOCIATION

Updates and information from the Atlantic County Office

Social Workers Month and World Bipolar Day

For Better Or Worse

His wife developed severe mental illness at age 66. This is the story of those hard and heartwarming first months

By Beth Wade
Public Relations Specialist

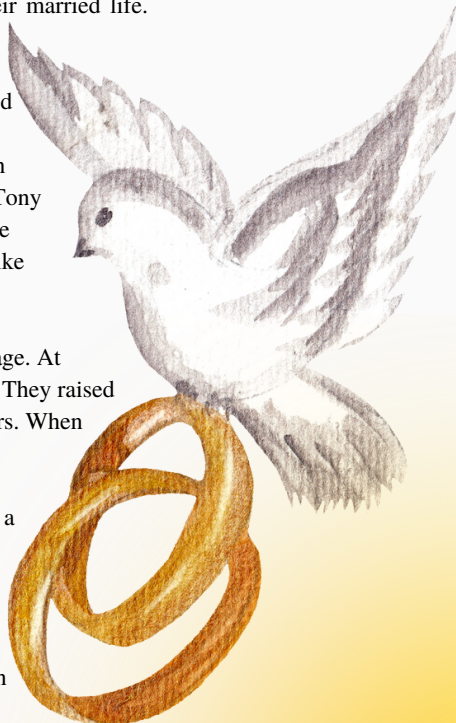
Throughout the year, we will share stories of families and consumers in order to shine a light on their journey towards recovery. We will rejoice in the celebration of their successes. We'll also reveal the challenges that exist for those families trying to access care for a loved one who does not recognize 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.

Tony and Linda lived in four states together during their married life. Tony's job opportunities took them across the country. Of all their journeys, the most recent one -- through a six-month battle with Linda's severe mental illness -- proved to be both the hardest and the most heartwarming.

Linda lives with Seasonal Affective Disorder, so she often struggled with depression during the winter months. When Tony noticed she was having difficulty last spring and summer, he sensed something was wrong, but he hoped it would pass, like it always had.

It didn't. She had difficulty with work relationships, then her marriage. At age 66, they'd been husband and wife for nearly 4 decades. They raised a son and a daughter. They'd built a great life with neighbors. When she confessed to having an affair, Tony said he forgave her, but she struggled with guilt.

Around that same time, a doctor determined Joan required a medically necessary hysterectomy. Following her physical recovery, she wasn't herself. She was withdrawn and isolated often in the bedroom. She delayed going back to work, and when she eventually returned, she declined into paranoia, which escalated when she started a new job within her company. (continued on page 2)



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20% of people age 55+ experience some type of mental health concern. The most common conditions include anxiety, severe cognitive impairment and mood disorders, such as depression and bipolar disorder.

Source: The Healthy Aging Program at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

“She was convinced that her employer was conspiring to get rid of her, that the position wasn’t legitimate,” he recalled. “Everything collapsed at the end of July.”

One day Linda called a beloved neighbor and was incomprehensible. That neighbor called an ambulance and Tony to say something was really, really wrong.

Ultimately, she was admitted to a psychiatric hospital. Tony visited Linda daily for a week where her delusions involved the patients and staff being hired actors.

Tony knew of her family history – a parent who likely lived with bipolar disorder and a sibling who tragically was lost to suicide at age 29. He talked to staff about that as well as what he had observed at home in the time leading up to the hospitalization. As it turns out, listen was all the staff could do because Linda – who was delusional upon admittance – hadn’t put Tony on her HIPAA paperwork. (HIPAA, or the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act, is a federal law that protects sensitive health information from being disclosed without patient consent or knowledge.) Tony had a directive at home, but it was a paper he didn’t realize he needed. No one at the hospital explained that, upon admission, Linda had denied communication with others on the HIPAA form.

Coincidentally, the social worker was on vacation that week. He figured he’d get answers when they returned.

On the seventh day, the social worker finally called, but couldn’t say much due to HIPAA. Then out of the blue, the next number that showed up on Tony’s phone was Linda’s cell. This was a surprise to him since she didn’t have her phone while in the hospital. Turns out she wasn’t even at the hospital; she’d been transferred to a day program.

“She said, ‘Come pick me up,’” he recalled, noting she didn’t even know where she was. She turned to ask staff as he held the line. “I couldn’t imagine this was actually happening.”

It was.

As a result of a COVID outbreak, Linda and some other patients had been discharged, he later learned.

At that point, his daughter came home from New York to help. While home, Linda was very ill and struggling with symptoms. She believed their home was bugged -- fearing the police, FBI, and international police were coming to get her for “all the bad things” she said she’d done. At times, she’d check Tony for wires.

Tony and his children were concerned about her access to her cell phone and social media because they were often triggers that worsened and distorted her mental state. He also removed kitchen knives from the home. At the same time, Linda’s car keys were taken because the family members were afraid that she could hurt herself and others behind the wheel.

“I wasn’t prepared to handle the situation,” he said.

Through packing her medications and researching the labels, he learned that his wife was living with schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and psychosis.

She had peculiar fixations and beliefs about Tony’s ribs and her ribs. The strangest, most hurtful thing Tony’s remembers was that Linda accused him of arranging to have her vagina sewn shut by the surgeon.

To help himself, Tony had a few online sessions with a therapist. Linda’s program referred him to Gail Christian, at with the MHA’s Intensive Family Support Services. Good friends, family, and neighbors all helped him persevere.

Despite her state of mind, Linda complied and took her medication willingly. But at one point, she got worse -- much worse. That 3-day period was the toughest, Tony recalled.

She accepted a phone call on the landline from the man with whom she’d had an extra-marital relationship. Tony saw the name appear on the TV screen and was in disbelief. At that point, he’d been caring for her at home for 4 extremely challenging months. The next morning as Tony prepared to go to work, Linda phoned the police to say she was being held against her will. One of the officers who arrived at the family’s home had responded before to the home on the first call, which helped the situation.

The following day, Linda called her daughter to say she’d taken pills and could not “continue living this way.” Tony drove home to find her unresponsive, and he called the ambulance.

At the ER, Linda was treated, but not admitted to the psychiatric hospital. Despite Tony’s vehement protests, the hospital sent her home with him.

Linda wasn’t eating much and slept most of the time. She stopped going to therapy. Her shaking, which had been treated with a medicine, worsened.

Then, suddenly about 4 to 5 months into Linda’s experience, she began to show signs of improvement. At Thanksgiving, she’d shared a family dinner with their adult children. Tony described one day when he saw things change like a light switch.

“It was like she woke up,” he said.

He believes the medication took time to help, but, in her case, it ultimately did work.

Since then, she continues to improve. Linda is hoping to return to the workforce, but in a new job. Moving forward, Linda intends to stop attending her program. She plans to continue with her medication prescriptions through her general physician. She now has a cell phone and drives.

Looking back, Tony said there were times the journey felt “unbearable.” He found going to work -- the routine and taking a break from the situation -- helped. Coping skills he learned from Gail helped. A coworker who struggled similarly with a family member was understanding, kind, and compassionate. She helped.

“I’m aware not everyone’s story ends well. I know I’m one of the lucky ones,” said Tony. “Her recovery has been remarkable. I have been with my wife for 37 years. I’m not giving up on her.”

Note: The names in this story have been changed in order to protect their privacy.

Gail Christian is the
Intensive Family Support Services
Coordinator at MHA Atlantic.
She serves on a statewide advocacy
committee and the Atlantic County
Systems Review Board.
609-652-3800 ext. 311 or
gchristian@mhanj.org.

WELLNESS BULLETIN BOARD

Virtual Stretching and Exercises

Class for flexibility and strength.
Relieve stress & boost energy
Wednesdays 10 am

All ages and levels.
Mix of standing and sitting

Call to register 609-463-6350
or find link online
cmclibrary.org/events page



"A Few Notable Women from Atlantic County"
Every TH, FR, SAT 10 am to 3 pm
Powerpoint presentation
Atlantic County Historical Society
907 Shore Road, Somers Point

AT THE LIBRARY



Yoga at the EHT Branch
First Thursday of each month at 9:30 am
Bring a mat. Register 609-927-8664

Spring Gardening with Rutgers Master Gardeners
Saturday, March 11 at 11 am - EHT Branch
Seed starting, container gardening, preparation
Register 609-927-8664

Into the Evening Book Club
March 17 at 6 pm - Ventnor Branch
Register 609-833-4614

Each library branch offers special events, classes, and other activities. View the complete list on atlanticlibrary.org. Click on "Calendar of events"



St. Patrick's Day Parade
Sunday, March 12 @ 1 pm
AC Boardwalk

Performing Arts at Stockton

Spring Dance Concert
Diverse program, eclectic choreography
March 2, 3 & 4 at 7:30 pm
Tickets \$12
Call 609-652-9000



The ribbon for Bipolar Awareness is typically black and white striped (that represent the opposite poles) or green.

Bipolar Awareness Day is March 30

The date corresponds to the birthday of influential painter Vincent van Gogh who lived with bipolar disorder

Bipolar disorder dramatically impacts the mood and may result in episodes of depression and elation, which can affect a person's health, productivity, and relationships. World Bipolar Day is set aside to increase awareness about bipolar disorder.

Ways to mark the day: wear a ribbon/bracelet, tell your story, learn more about bipolar disorder. Bipolar disorder is more common than most people know. Extreme mood swings can go unnoticed or are dismissed as temperamental issues. Individuals affected by bipolar experience waves of mania or depression. Medication, counseling, and support groups can help with the treatment.

MHANJ's United By Wellness center offers an online group for Bipolar Support. See flier at right for details

If you are a family member of someone who is struggling with bipolar that is not well-managed, call our IFSS program. Support is available.

609-652-3800 ext. 301

Free Peer-Led
BIPOLAR SUPPORT GROUP
Mondays 6pm

- SHARE IDEAS & EXPERIENCES
- BENEFIT FROM MUTUAL SUPPORT
- DEVELOP TOOLS FOR HEALTHIER LIVING AND SELF-CARE

 **zoom** Meeting ID: 957 6500 1615

 609-652-3800  Unitedbywellness@mhanj.org

This is a Group of United By Wellness:
MHANJ's Virtual Wellness Center

mhaac.info/ubw

Thank You

*During Social Workers Month,
we proudly recognize several special
members of the MHA Atlantic staff*



Vicki Phillips

Linda Bastedo



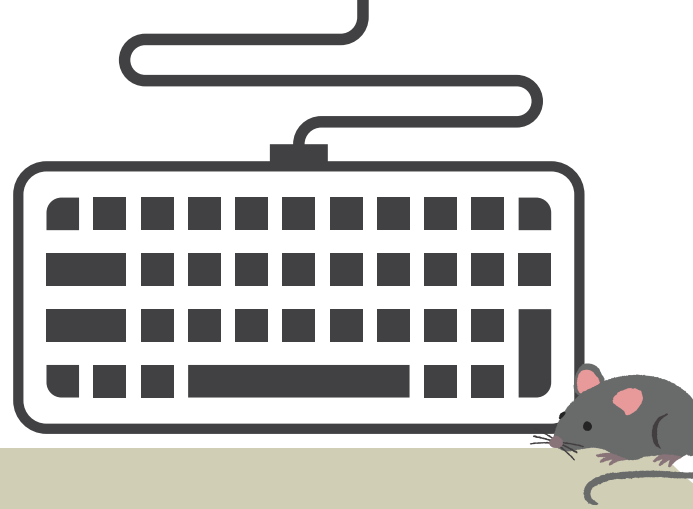
Gail Christian

Emily McCall



NEWS

briefs



A 10-year milestone for one of our own



Congratulations to Carolyn Quinn who was honored at a recent brunch by her coworkers/work family! She was treated to flowers and a gift card. Carolyn is our Community Engagement and Wellness Programs Director. She started at MHA Atlantic as the ICE Wellness Program Manager.

Focus on Seniors and Mental Health

The Mental Health Association in Atlantic County has reached out to all senior centers in an effort to raise awareness around mental health and its importance to our senior populations.

Staff will be providing literature about our services including online support groups, in-person workshops, Too Much Stuff meetings, Boomer's group, call lines, and mental health screening. Some senior centers expressed an interest in having a member of our staff speak in person on senior-focused wellness topics.

If you are connected to a senior club, senior housing, or elder services in Atlantic County and would like literature to share with seniors and/or to arrange for a speaker, please reach out to MHA Atlantic Executive Director, Vicki Phillips, at vphillips@mhanj.org or 609 652-3800 ext. 307.



Stigma Free Church Outreach

In a follow up to the Stigma Free Atlantic initiative, our office will be reaching out to all local churches to offer printed materials, resources, and/or a presentation. Stigma Free is interested in any needs related to mental health and substance use disorder in the faith-based community.

Any parishioner or leader associated with the faith-based community who is in need of information or support, can contact the Stigma Free committee at StigmaFreeAtlantic@mhanj.org

New Mobile Outreach Through JBRC

On Tuesday, February 21 AtlantiCare cut the ribbon to debut their John Brooks Recovery Center Mobile Outreach Vehicle, which enhances their ability to provide the community with more services, specifically to those struggling with substance use disorders and mental health challenges.

President and CEO Lori Herndon shared on behalf of the outreach team, "We're excited to go out to the community, meeting them where they are instead of hoping they come out to us." Read more about their new outreach program. <https://bit.ly/3ZbJsqH>



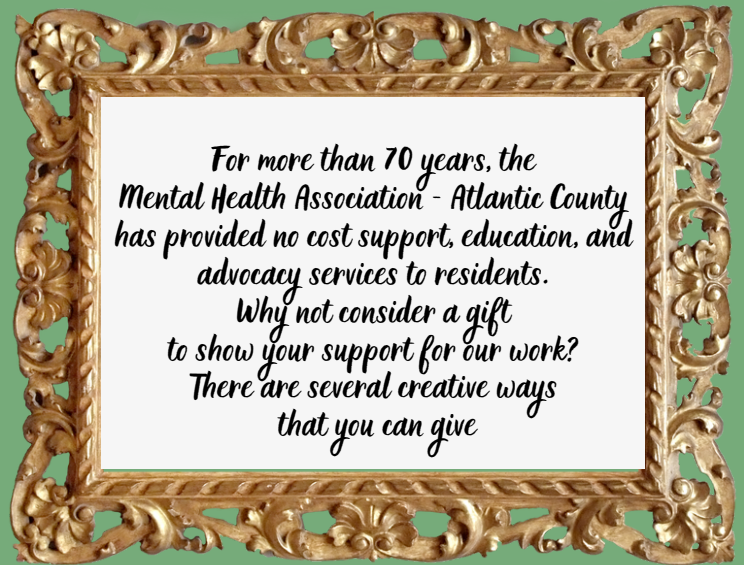
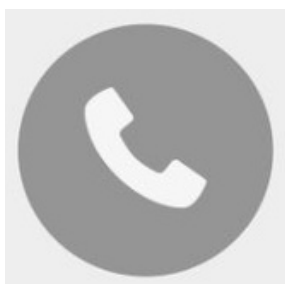
**Acute Care Family
Program serves
families in crisis
7 days per week
Available 8 am to 8 pm
609-517-8614**

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

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

*Help is a phone
call away*



*For more than 70 years, the
Mental Health Association - Atlantic County
has provided no cost support, education, and
advocacy services to residents.
Why not consider a gift
to show your support for our work?
There are several creative ways
that you can give*

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.



Eating Disorders Awareness Week is February 27 to March 5



"I just really want to be there for anyone who needs help like I did and wants to feel less alone while dealing with something that makes you think you'll never be good enough. Some people need someone to say, 'I've been there...I understand, and there's hope for the future.'"

**~Kris Auble
Facilitator of the
Balance & Body Image Group**

Balance & Body Image

Every 1st & 3rd Tuesday at 7pm

A peer-led support group for adults living with or recovering from disordered eating

Join us as we find support from others who have experienced disordered eating, learn about healthy coping skills to aid recovery, and work together to improve self-worth and self-esteem.

Call/email for Zoom meeting information or join the virtual wellness center at no cost using this link:

<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/8VXP2K8>



609-652-3800



Unitedbywellness@mhanj.org



mhaac.info/ubw



THIS IS A GROUP OF UNITED BY WELLNESS: MCHANJ'S VIRTUAL WELLNESS CENTER