Love, support key to mental illness recovery

By Alexa Zoellner Union staff writer | Posted: Thursday, July 30, 2015 8:31 am

A war where the enemy's strategy is to convince you that the war is not actually happening.

That's how University of Wisconsin-Madison student Annette Leach described the battle against mental illness at NAMI Jefferson County's "Reaching Out" event on Tuesday.

NAMI, the National Alliance on Mental Illness, established Jefferson County as an affiliate in April and "Reaching Out" was its first event.

"We're here not only to advocate, but to educate," Neal Zinda, NAMI Jefferson County vice president, said in his opening statement.

The event took place in the Fort Memorial Hospital auditorium starting at 6 p.m. and featured six presentations from various members of NAMI and Jefferson County administration, including Leach, Kyira Hauer, Andrea Grittner, Kathi Cauley, Kim Propp and Maria Hanson.

Each speaker had roughly 10 minutes for their presentation. A question-and-answer session followed.

"Too often, this enemy (in the war against mental illness) is the lack of support within our communities," Leach, a member of NAMI, said. "Our deficiencies in mental healthcare, our shortages in education and the stigmas that we unintentionally promote. I have had a lot of enemies in my war against mental illness, of which my greatest and most menacing was myself."

HEART TO HEART

HEART TO HEART — NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness) Jefferson County held its first event, "Reaching Out," on Tuesday at Fort Atkinson Memorial Hospital. The event featured six speakers — Kathi Cauley, Jefferson County Human Services director; Kyira Hauer, associate director of NAMI Wisconsin; Kim Propp, Jefferson County Emergency Mental Health supervisor; Maria Hanson, member of NAMI Wisconsin and Mendota Mental Health; and Annette Leach, student at University of Wisconsin-Madison and NAMI member. For more photos, click here. — Daily union photos by Alexa Zoellner.

Leach was diagnosed with depression the month before she entered her freshman year of college. It was a life-changing diagnosis.

"On the one hand, I had clarity," Leach said. "My lack of appetite, the constant longing for my bed, the extreme rage I would feel at these petty things and the desire to give up because life just felt too hard — it all made sense."

But there were two sides to the coin.

"I had depression," she continued. "(I thought), 'that's a mental illness, right? God, I must be crazy.' How was I ever supposed to admit this to anyone? How was I ever supposed to accept it myself."

Leach held tightly to stigmas throughout her first few semesters of college. She said she truly felt she never would be understood, or worse, that she never would understand herself.

“I shamed myself daily with self-deprecating thoughts and I punished myself often, leaving marks on my wrists,” she explained. “I didn’t want to hate myself anymore, but the daily battle was just too tolling.

“I didn’t see myself ever winning my war with mental illness and I wanted to escape,” she added. “I wanted to surrender to my depression. I wanted to die. I can say with certainty that I would have, had it not been for my roommate — my guardian angel — named Erin.”

Leach wanted to fit in and, at a “party school,” that often meant drinking — which was when her suicidal impulses were the worst.

One Friday night, Leach said she lost all control of her emotions and actions.

“I remember begging Erin hysterically, ‘please, just let me kill myself tonight. Let me die tonight. Help me find a way that I can end all of this pain,’” Leach said. “And although she’s half my size — I kid you not, she’s 4 feet, 10 inches — she held my hands and my body so tightly in a way that I couldn’t hurt myself. She held me long enough for me to reach exhaustion. Until I just couldn’t fight back anymore.”

That night, her “warrior” Erin gave Leach a reason to keep fighting. Erin believed her life had worth and that Leach soon would see that worth as well.

“That next semester I found a whole group of soldiers to help me fight back against my depression,” Leach said. “My friends at NAMI UW have played some of the largest roles in my self-acceptance.”

They educated Leach on mental disorders, encouraged her to stop her own stigmas and directed her to help discover her passion for helping others with mental illnesses.

Leach also talked about the difficulties she has in gaining access to proper mental health care.

“As a college student, I speak for myself and my peers when I say that my mental healthcare options are limited and not easily accessible,” Leach said.

A Minnesota native, Leach explained that she talks to her therapist — who I located in Minnesota — over the telephone every two weeks and must make a trip back every three months to see her psychiatrist.

The fact that she must seek mental healthcare from people nearly 300 miles away is absolutely unacceptable, she insisted.

“The lack of awareness in Wisconsin in encroaching upon our battlefront,” Leach said. “I am just one solider in this massive war against mental illness, but I am backed by the toughest army imaginable — my irreplaceable family who would move mountains for me, my compassionate friends who work very, very hard to understand me, and my angelic providers back home who have been with me every step of the way — and I am so blessed to have all the support I do in this battle.”

However, not everyone is so lucky as to have a support system.

“It is our job to stop the stigmas that shame people into silence,” Leach said. “Mental illness is real. It is prevalent,

and it is everywhere. Including here in Jefferson County. Today, I am recruiting you in making mental illness something to talk about."

Hauer, the associate director of NAMI Wisconsin, shared a powerpoint and discussed the creation of NAMI, membership and the services it has to offer.

"NAMI started out as a grassroots organization," Hauer said. "There were a couple ladies that had lunch together and decided there weren't enough services for their children and other people living with mental illness, and they needed to do something about it."

She explained that, along with needing support, they needed to educate the community and get rid of the stigma of mental illness.

"Out of that bore this huge organization that is now crossing borders and working all over the world in different capacities," Hauer continued. "I think most people, when they hear about national organizations, think it's a bunch of paid staff, but about 90 percent of NAMI is run on volunteers."

The "buzz words" that NAMI is known for are support, advocacy and education, she said. All of NAMI's programs are based off of those.

Hauer also spoke about NAMI's signature programs such as "Family to Family" and "Peer to Peer."

She explained that, once affiliates are fully established, they typically have monthly meetings where a range of topics can be discussed. Possible topics include medicine, health insurance and referral processes.

While the programs and meetings are free and open to the entire community, Hauer stressed that membership still is extremely important.

"That membership is really key," Hauer said. "When we can go out and say 'we're speaking on behalf of 50 people that need your support,' that carries a lot more weight than speaking on behalf of three people, especially legislatively. The more people we have joining with us, the more influence we'll have."

Grittner, a development associate at NAMI Waukesha, gave a presentation on NAMI Walks.

"NAMI Walks takes place all across America," Grittner said. "It is the largest and most successful mental health awareness and fundraising event in America."

She explained that NAMI Walks currently take place in over 80 different communities with more than 100,000 people participating. All funds from the walks go to support local NAMI programs.

"It brings together thousands of individuals and supporters to celebrate mental illness recovery," Grittner said. "To honor those who have lost their lives to mental illness and to help raise funds, combat stigma and promote awareness."

Last year NAMI Walks Waukesha raised roughly $52,000, she said, and had more than 400 people take part. This year, she said, the goal is $55,000 and they hope for even more participants, especially since NAMI Jefferson County will be partnering with NAMI Waukesha for the event.

"We're really excited that NAMI Jefferson County is going to be partnering with us," Grittner said. "A portion of

the proceeds that are raised through anyone in Jefferson County would come back into your community to help grow those programs."

The event is free, features live entertainment and anyone is welcome, regardless of whether they can make a donation or not. Although, raising $100 or more will earn a free official NAMI Walks T-shirt.

It will take place on Sept. 19 at Frame Park Picnic Shelter in Waukesha. Check-in begins at 10 a.m. and the walk at 11 a.m.

"It's a great day to come together where there's no stigma attached to mental illness," Grittner said. "We're helping change how Americans view mental illness one step at a time."

Cauley, the director of Jefferson County human services, spoke about her experience in the mental health field and the different services provided by Jefferson County.

"I came (to Jefferson County Human Services) as a mental health therapist," Cauley said. "So my background is a little bit different from other Human Services administrators who come more from the child welfare side of things typically."

She explained that the Human Services department is organized into five divisions — administration, which pays the bills; behavioral health, child and family, the aging and disability resource center, and intake maintenance.

The behavioral health division covers mental health, and alcohol and drug addiction. It provides adults and children with services such as assessment and case plans; intoxicated driver assessment; crisis intake; counseling and psychotherapy; medication management, monitoring and supervision; and case management.

Child and family programs include assistance in finding appropriate community resources; coordinating supervision for juveniles, abused or neglected children; assistance with counseling; parenting; groups for youth; case management, and summer youth activities.

The Aging and Disability Resource Center provides help and information to individuals of all ages who suffer from physical or intellectual disabilities and substance abuse concerns as well as caregivers, family, friends and guardians.

The intake unit handles all child and adult protective service matters and referrals, including child abuse and neglect investigations, and suicide assessments and consequent civil commitments when appropriate.

"Something we're very excited about this year is that we were able to ask for and receive the funding to hire a children's therapist," Cauley continued. "There's a shortage of those in Jefferson County and the first time ever we have (a therapist that specializes in children) in our clinic."

She concluded her presentation by expressing her delight at being able to work more closely with NAMI now that Jefferson County is an affiliate.

"When treatment is person-centered and people have a say in what they want and how things should be, they have an opportunity to recover in a way that is meaningful to them," Cauley said.

Propp is the Jefferson County Emergency Mental Health supervisor.

“We have six full-time crisis workers,” Propp said. “We have someone at our agency 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year. There is always someone there to answer the phone, to go mobile and go out to assess someone if needed, and we try to provide comprehensive services.”

In 2014 there were 6,375 contacts in the crisis unit. Propp said that number has risen each year.

She spoke about a program in Jefferson County called Zero Suicide.

“The core belief for Zero Suicide is that these deaths can be prevented,” Propp explained. “That every life matters and that one suicide is too many.”

The program is a system-wide approach that aims to improve services and outcomes, and encompasses more than just professionals offering services.

“This is about the community partnering with NAMI and involving everyone in this approach,” Propp said. “I look forward to working more with NAMI Jefferson County.”

Also speaking about her experience with mental illness was Hanson, a member of NAMI Wisconsin and part of Mendota Mental Health.

“I’m horrible at suicide” Hanson stated. “I suck at suicide. I’ve tried it 13 times and I’ve failed every single time, so I’m giving up on it for lent. I suck at it so bad.”

Hanson, a lawyer by career, was born and grew up in gang-infested Cabrini-Green in Chicago. She described it as living in a war zone.

Both her mother and grandmother suffered from mental illness.

“At six years old my mother and grandmother dropped me off on the streets to die,” Hanson said. “Luckily my mother, at the last minute, showed some mercy, and decided to call someone she had worked with — a wonderful African American woman named Sal — who took me in.”

Sal was 16 at the time, yet she cared for Hanson from age six to 10.

“Her story was harsh too,” Hanson said. “She had a hard time getting a job, so she spent part of her time being a hooker, and that’s how she made her living. That’s how she fed me.”

After a stint in a juvenile detention center for drug possession, Hanson ended up back with her biological parents at age 12. She was sexually abused by her father for four years, but a friend’s family took her in on a daily basis and provided her with support.

“Though my life is hard, and full of trauma and poverty, there was a key element that kept my shattered life together,” Hanson said. “That key element was love. When you talk about recovery, I think people sometimes leave out that very important element — that it takes that unconditional love to hold you together.”

She was pregnant at 15, using drugs and alcohol to cover up her scars and married at 16. When her first husband became abusive, her father-in-law came and took her to the Army Base where she was to be stationed to get her away from his own son.

“Again and again and again,” Hanson said. “My story is just lined with people who showed love to me, even in the

face of a really battered and broken spirit."

She was an Army Sergeant, and even though she was a "messed up kid," she was good in the military, she acknowledged.

Hanson remarried, but because both her and her second husband were bisexual she was kicked out of the military.

"This was way before don't-ask don't-tell," she explained. "At that time you were kicked out and there were no if, ands or buts about it."

She ended up having to abandon her husband to save his career.

"I lost my son, my husband, my career which I had planned to have for the next 20 years," Hanson said. "I came home even more broken."

She didn't see herself as a person that could get an education, but she ended up going back to school at the suggestion of a friend and got her Human Service degree.

"I liked it so much that I wanted to go to school more," Hanson said. "And so I went on to get my bachelor's degree, but during this whole time I was struggling with my mental illness."

It wasn't until she was 25 that she was diagnosed with schitzoaffective disorder.

"I was just finally getting a name on something," Hanson said. "It was a long haul. A lot of suicide attempts, a lot of hospitalizations, trying to maintain a career, trying to maintain a school education while everything in my head was falling apart."

She explained that it took her years to get on the correct medication and that she still struggles with them.

"It's a battle," Hanson said. "But again and again and again it comes down to those connections. What happened with me is I ended up getting involved in recovery. I finally got a handle over my drug and alcohol addiction. That pulled me into a world filled with loving and compassionate people."

She ended up finding a family with a complete support system in Alcoholics Anonymous.

"It's the art of giving," Hanson said. "And that's really what it comes down to when I talk about NAMI. NAMI is that family.

"For many people that are struggling out there in the community that are just fighting their way through the hardships — either struggling through mental illness themselves or have a family member struggling or providers that work in systems that are overcrowded — we need each other," she insisted. "We need each other to be those connections, and that's what NAMI has to offer."

She said NAMI Jefferson County can help build a community for the next person down the line that's falling apart without support.

"That's the beauty of these NAMI affiliates," Hanson said. "It starts right at the grassroots. It's people creating support for people. We are a web of compassion and caring that reach out to those who don't have those connections."

The final presentation was followed by a question-and-answer session.

Questions included how NAMI Jefferson County is spreading the word of its establishment, how school districts can be incorporated into the program and what kind of structure NAMI Jefferson County is expected to have.

Zinda and NAMI Jefferson County President Deb Thompson said they have been employing a variety of sources to spread the word, including a newspaper article and sending information to radio stations.

“We’re also using social media such as Facebook,” Thompson said. “We’ll be setting up a Twitter account and a website soon.”

Hauer explained that there are programs specific to schools, and if interest is shown to contact her.

“We can get creative on what you’re looking for as long as the schools want us,” Hauer said. “If you want us we can come in and do whatever you want.”

She also answered the question regarding affiliate structure.

“Typically (new NAMI affiliates) start with board meetings, support meetings and support groups so they can start planning,” Hauer said.

Thompson added that until she and Zinda are trained in NAMI’s signature programs, they will be offering basic support groups. They are looking to have the first peer and family support groups by the end of August.

For more information regarding NAMI Jefferson County, persons may contact Thompson at (920) 728-4627 or Zinda at (920) 650-8816. They also may email NAMI.JeffersonWI@gmail.com; regarding NAMI Wisconsin, call (608) 268-6000 or email kyira@namiwisconsin.org;

Regarding NAMI Walks Waukesha, call (262) 409-2742, email andrea@namiwaukesha.org or visit www.namiwalks.org/waukesha.

For Jefferson County Human Services, persons may call (920) 674-3105 or visit www.jeffersoncountywi.gov.

For Zero Suicide, visit www.zerosuicide.com.