

A Voice

It has been interesting that with all that has happened in the past couple of weeks that my heart is longing to get back to those that I advocate for.

Obviously, I am very excited about all that is happening and very honored to be speaking with two Supreme Court Justices this week. It is a privilege and an honor. As I wrote my speech over the weekend – something that comes amazingly easy for me, my heart was being tugged. I miss those that Harrison calls his lost. This morning, the first thing I did when I woke up was to email a friend and mental health professional and asked her to set up a time that I can go back to a residential treatment center and speak with the men that are there. I have done this before and this is where my heart flourishes.

It is important to take the opportunities that we are given in life to be a bigger voice for those who don't have a voice – however we must never lose the direct connect to those we are speaking for! I miss them and I miss working directly with those that are searching and swaying back and forth from hope and demise.

As I wrote the speech for Wednesday evening – it was inevitable that my mind would shift back to those memories of desperation and fear. Where hope seemed like a distant entity that I couldn't reach. Tens of thousands of people are at that place in their lives right now. I am often reminded that at times, as little as a smile from someone rather than a judgment look, kept me alive for just one more day.

We must be kind to one another. Strangers and friends. We do not know what another person is going through – we do not know their story. I have always found that it is so much easier to be nice than to be indifferent or judgmental. The payoff is immediate – I feel better just smiling!

It was not too many years ago that if given the opportunity to speak to an audience like Wednesday nights audience, my speech would have had a very different tone. I was frustrated and angry. I had felt as though everything had gone wrong (and it did). I would have attacked the system and torn it apart piece by piece – blaming it for nearly killing me and so many others.

What would that have done? Nothing! It would have put up walls and barriers that I would never be able to get through. That mindset would have torn my soul apart and left me living in the past forever. Some call this “rising above”. I don't call it that. I haven't risen above anything – I have transformed it, taken charge of it – I decided that the past and this illness were not going to drive my life; I know where that road ends. That transformation could not have taken place without friends, family and my army of therapy, medication and case management.

Many – all too many, do not have these components in their lives. It is troubling to know just how many do not have any of these components in their lives – even basic psychiatric needs in

a prison and certainly nothing on the streets. Their lives do not have to be that way – mental illness can be maintained.

When I stand on that podium and look out to the audience on Wednesday night – I am only the voice, the vessel – behind me will stand 23,000 mentally ill inmates in Ohio Prisons, most that are non-violent and who's illnesses could be maintained, countless mentally ill that are homeless, and countless mentally ill that are hospitalized. Behind me will also stand those that have lost their lives to their illnesses; some who have had the components in their lives but the illness was too strong and many who we simply ignored, turned our heads with indifference. We turn our heads because our lives are so busy and theirs are irrelevant and they use the excuse of mental illness to not abide by the laws and rules of our society – “really”! I am one of them – I am no different and I would challenge anyone to a game of intelligence and social etiquette. I never forget I am one of them.

These are the people that are speaking. It all has very little to do with me, it is their voice that is being heard.

Start listening to those with mental illness – they speak in many different ways and tongues. Do not ignore their plea for help and their need for your compassion. They are not like you – they do not think like you, medicated or not – I have never met a mentally person that did not an interesting perspective on life – you might be surprised – just what YOU could learn! The reality is -that it would be only beneficial to listen to anyone that is not likeminded - that is how we learn and how we grow!