

It is 2010! It has only been 6 weeks since I have sat down and written a column, yet it seems like a year. I was told to keep away from all work related efforts for a few weeks and give myself the time I needed with family and processing the year itself. I have done that and now I am over it – time to get busy! That was about all the relaxing I could handle!

I have big hopes for 2010 – big hopes for the mental health community and what we can do to contribute to a bigger cause than simply stabilizing and maintaining the mentally ill – but rather empower and encourage them. There are great hurdles in front of us. Stigma is still a very troublesome burden on the mental health community. Along with stigma is ignorance which is a dangerous ingredient in any mixture. Budget cuts would make any healthy social service employee go insane themselves. Then of course there is the fact that the mentally ill community is growing, homelessness is growing and the prison population is growing: This while we are seeing a continuum of the misrepresentation of the mentally ill in the general media and budgets declining. Of course these things get me all fired up – however I choose to not attack the facts of the matter and hope to work with others in our community to change perception and the drive the necessity of community based programs in order to change the trajectory.

While I didn't write much over the course of the past 6 weeks, I never stopped reading. It is disturbing to read the news clips regarding mental illness from all over the world. Yet, it is good to have a clear picture of what we are dealing with. Though the picture is not something I am happy about – it is clear and it does give us a defined goal – 'Change it!' I read through the countless news clips and listened to various shows and radio broadcasts... the mentally ill are generally associated with some crime in some

way. If people took the time to evaluate the statistics of these crimes they would certainly realize how small the percentage is that a mentally ill person commits a violent crime – yet our trusty media machine does a fantastic job of keeping us abreast of every violent offense that relates to a mentally ill person, always forgetting to dig a layer deeper to see that that persons illness, in most cases, was put in the hands of law enforcement and their definition of rehabilitation long before any violent offense ever occurred. Does anyone use common sense anymore? I have met few people that do not know how to use an excel spreadsheet... it is only a matter of plugging in a few numbers to realize that the financial expense of our continued response to mental health is ridiculous and the human expense has been deadly.

Someone recently stated to me, “Well, Cory, the entire nation is going through a tremendous recession and budgets must be cut!” I said, “I realize this, thank you for pointing it out – however, with that philosophy could you please explain to me the past 30 years of funding in mental health?” No, they could not. Now I do not place blame anywhere, actually, because if I did, I would have to blame everywhere, from charitable mega machines such as the United Way to local communities. How do we change this? It all comes from perception and stigmatization transformation. Do you see any 5K’s in your neighborhood for the mentally ill? Most likely not – yet there are some. One in Boston this summer, I found.

The mental health community is teaming with brilliant artists, musicians, poets and writers and it is high time that we brought THAT perception to the forefront of our awareness rather than our criminal behavior that by the way, the “normal” community has beat us in by 80%! The photos on the home page of this site

reflects people throughout the years that have dealt with mental illness – people that we celebrate. If you can look at a Van Gogh painting and appreciate it – then you need to be able to appreciate mental illness. If you can appreciate a performance by Robert Downing Jr. then you need to be able to appreciate mental illness. And so the list could go on. We are not simple, we are complex – we are far from stupid, many are genius. Many of the mentally ill have more thoughts racing through their minds in one afternoon than you will have for 48 hours!

The challenge that I have given myself this year and a challenge that I proposed to you is this: Find solutions not more questions. TRY something new – what could it possibly hurt at this point! I do not intend to glorify mental illness, but to identify it for what it really is. It is not this dark and dangerous monstrosity that it is being defined as. Society is extracting the worst from our community. It is our responsibility to show our best – to change our perception – no one can do that for us. This is a call to all that are mentally ill and all the advocates and mental health professionals out there.

Would you believe that I can count 6 people that I have asked about the movie “A Beautiful Mind” that they did not know it was about schizophrenia? These are intelligent people, but they just didn’t pick up on the fact that a Nobel laureate was a schizophrenic. Why? Because the ability and accomplishment of John Nash became the focus and the mental illness was secondary. This is a great shift, actually. The talents, character and individuality of a person should supersede the illness when it comes to public perception. However, we do need the awareness as well – desperately. I haven’t asked anyone about “The Soloist” but my guess is that I could count just as many that would say that

Nathaniel Ayers was simply a black homeless guy in the inner city of Los Angeles. I could be wrong, but I doubt it. These two movies mentioned are wonderful and they did their job – but we in the mental health community need to do ours.

There is no doubt that the mental health community has a tremendous obstacle. Our illness are not looked upon as “real illnesses” like Cancer, Diabetes and so forth, yet we are number 9 on the leading causes of death in the United States (suicide only) add in our other ailments and we would certainly climb that unwanted chart.

Going into 2010 we know what’s what. We owe it to ourselves and our community to raise the bar and promote empowerment and encourage beyond stability and mental maintenance. A challenge much easier to type than to do.

Let’s get started!

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