

In My Own Voice: How Early Intervention Led to Great Success

by Robin Cunningham

When I was thirteen, I suddenly began to hallucinate and told my parents that I was hearing voices. My parents suggested that I was mentally ill, which was a very strange and unknown concept for me. Five

days later my mother took me to see a psychiatrist.

The symptoms of my illness appeared very suddenly and dramatically, and my condition deteriorated very rapidly. One moment I

was fine and, the next, I was completely overwhelmed by a continuous barrage of hallucinations. Other symptoms of my illness followed rapidly and my world completely shattered: thought insertions; paranoid delusions; delusions of grandeur, distorted thinking; changes in perceptions; severe anxiety; ritualistic behaviors and on occasion, severe depression. At one point, I even had my own language.

I didn't even know my family had a long history of mental illness until I was diagnosed. My grandfather

hanged himself with a bed sheet while a patient for schizophrenia at Eastern Washington State Hospital. My father's older brother and younger sister had schizophrenia. My father's twin sister was a recluse and probably had a serious brain disease, while my father held on to his sanity by his fingernails.

As I tried desperately to deal with the agonizing affects of my illness, Dr. Levy immediately began a search for a medication that would correct or compensate for my brain malfunction. The first medications he tried did not help very much, but it seems receiving them early on in my illness did prevent my brain from more deterioration.

Dr. Levy was an excellent doctor, "ahead of his time". I was fortunate. He tried every new drug as it was introduced. He provided weekly therapy sessions which taught me coping skills enabling me to deal with the crippling impact of my illness and giving me the ability to function in society. Soon he involved my entire family in this important process. Dr. Levy did his best to educate my family and me about mental illness, a daunting task for a busy professional.

If NAMI was around at the time of my diagnosis, it would

have been an invaluable help. NAMI could have provided peer support through its Peer to Peer and Just Friends programs and my parents would surely have benefited from NAMI's Visions for Tomorrow and Family to Family classes.

I survived high school with my social skills steadily improving and was quite successful in college. Then for reasons of my own, as we all have, I stopped taking my medication. My relapse was rapid and complete with all my original symptoms returning in full force. I ended up dropping out of graduate school, gathering my meager belongings, and I returned home to Dr. Levy for help.

Back under Dr. Levy's care, we tried yet another medication.

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Young Robin

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A Message from NAMI's New Executive Director, Mike Fitzpatrick

Welcome to NAMI's first member/donor newsletter which provides an excellent opportunity for me to introduce myself as NAMI's new Executive Director, recognize your role in the NAMI movement, and to share some remarkable stories of hope, recovery and action!

For much of the past 25 years I have been involved with NAMI in many roles. I have served as a local affiliate Director, State Executive Director, on the NAMI national staff, and as a family member.

While I have had a number of other "careers", the connection I have with NAMI is real and long standing.

Perhaps you as NAMI supporters have had similar experiences with your relationship to NAMI, be it new or longstanding? For 25 years NAMI, through its remarkable "people resources", and through its invaluable donor resources, has carried on a tradition of



delivering information and inspiration essential to improve the lives of people who live with mental illnesses.

Ensuring that mental illness is no obstacle to a full life is no small task. But NAMI, through support from you — NAMI members, donors and friends — has managed to do just that. This newsletter offers but a few of the real life accomplishments and stories behind your

support and mine, and many thousands of others. This newsletter also offers proof of what our relationship with NAMI can accomplish, in the many forms that it might take.

Certainly the Board of Directors, my staff and I still have a great deal of work to do. Thousands of people in this country have yet to be reached by the NAMI movement. We will continue to spread the word that recovery from serious mental illness is not just possible, but, for many, probable. We will not and we cannot rest until there is

no need for a NAMI movement.

I began this message with a hello and the sincere hope that, if we have not yet met, we will. I also want to hear from you. If you have any comments on this newsletter or have any contributions to it, we welcome it.

Thank you for all that you have done and continue to do and I hope you enjoy the newsletter!

Yours truly,
Mike Fitzpatrick

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This time, there were many more medication treatments on the market for us to choose. Remarkably, the first one we tried fixed my faulty brain chemistry and virtually eliminated the symptoms of my schizophrenia. It was then that the coping skills I learned were transformed into "personal growth strategies", which have been of great help to me ever since.

Back at school I obtained my MBA and began a challenging business career. Within three years, I advanced to the level of Vice President of an industry leading company and then served as a senior executive officer for several Fortune 500 corporations, a major Wall Street investment bank, and a highly profitable commercial bank. I

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The Nation's Voice on Mental Illness

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My Favorite Teacher

By Kristen Putignano

I would like to share a story about a teacher that changed my life forever. In sixth grade, I had my first male teacher. Frankly, I did not really know what to expect from this experience. That was the year before I got sick. His name was Mr. Minarovich (Mr. M). He was nice. It was also his first year of teaching. Our class always had fun in his classroom. I often stayed after school for extra help, or just to play a game of mancala with Mr. M. I thought it was cool to learn that teachers are real people too! When I was younger, I always thought they were aliens or some other unusual creature. The year was going well. It was not easy for our class or Mr. M to get accustomed to each other. We were always ready for one of his “serious talks.” We often laughed because Mr. M liked to talk about problems in the class, especially if we were being disrespectful toward him. My parents met Mr. Minarovich at parent-teacher conferences. They also liked him. The year ended, and I was sad to go on to a new

school, because I felt like I was losing a friend. I told him that and he reassured me that I could come back and visit him anytime. I did visit Mr. M often. As the year went on, fewer and fewer people went back to visit Mr. M, but I would never miss a game of mancala.

Then I got sick. I was embarrassed that I had to go to a psychiatric hospital for depression and self harm. My mom told me that Mr. M found out that I was in the hospital and wanted to come to visit me. I was embarrassed at first, but then I looked forward to his visit. He came one day, and brought me an article about a friend of his that had committed suicide. He told me how that had affected him, and that he would be very upset if that same thing happened to me because he cared about me. I was astonished and amazed when I saw in his face how much he really meant it. Just that talk with Mr. M changed my outlook on taking my life because I realized I had



people other than my family that cared about what happened to me.

Since then, I have had three surgeries on my shoulder, and have been hospitalized in a psychiatric hospital quite a lot. Mr. M has been there for me every single time, through the bad and good. I know that he is a shoulder to lean and cry on. I also know that he is my friend. I would not be where I am today without Mr. M. He has had an enormous impact on my life. I do not see Mr. M as much these days as I used to because I am out of school. However, we always keep in touch and I would never miss a few mancala games with him now and again. I now realize that both of us learned a lot during his first year of teaching. I also know now that I have made a friend for life.

Calendar of Events

Dates	Location	Events
September 8-12, 2004	Washington, DC	NAMI NATIONAL CONVENTION
Sept. 30th-Oct 1st 2004	Tulsa, OK	2004 Zarrow Mental Health Symposium
October 2, 2004	Orlando, FL	NAMI Walks: Orlando, FL Lake Eloa Amphitheater - 10AM
October 3, 2004	Helena, MT	NAMI Walks: Helena, MT State Capital Complex - noon
October 7, 2004	Salt Lake City, UT	NAMI Utah Conference
October 10, 2004	Jersey City, NJ	NAMI Walks: Jersey City, NJ Liberty State Park - 11AM
October 9-10, 2004	New York, NY	In Our Own Voices: Training NAMI New York
November 2-3, 2004	Indianapolis, IN	In Our Own Voices: NAMI Indiana State Conference
November 3-5, 2004	Great Falls, MT	In Our Own Voices: NAMI Montana State Conference
November 5-14, 2004	Nationwide on the Web	NAMI's 1st Annual On-Line Auction
November 6, 2004	Washington, DC	The NAMI Walks for the Mind of America national walk in Washington DC

Leadership Alliance Corner

Congratulations to those of you who joined NAMI's Leadership Alliance, a group of special NAMI friends who contribute an annual gift of \$500 or more. The Leadership Alliance provides several benefits, including a special celebratory event at our annual convention.

This year our Leadership Alliance members will celebrate

NAMI's 25th Anniversary and be honored at a lovely dinner at the Sequoia Restaurant overlooking the Potomac, followed by a night time driving tour of our national monuments on September 10, 2004 during our annual convention in Washington, DC.

Last year's event, at the NAMI convention in Minneapolis, was attended by over one hundred of our Leadership Alliance members.

During that very successful event, they had the opportunity to hear from the newly appointed Director of NIMH, Dr. Thomas Insel, and to have their personal questions on mental illness research and treatment answered by a distinguished panel of experts.

To learn about NAMI's Leadership Alliance, please call Linda Radcliffe at 1-800-950-6264, ext. 7970.



Please Join Us

As NAMI Celebrates its 25th Anniversary

Visionaries though they were, the 284 pioneers who gathered in September 1979 for a meeting that would launch "the nation's voice on mental illness" could not have imagined the impact of what they were setting into motion. This year, NAMI celebrates that event and celebrates 25 years of family and consumer education, support, advocacy and research. ... And we want you to join in with us!

Celebratory Wall

Online, www.nami.org, Ongoing
Contact: Winsome Clarke
(winsome@nami.org)

Pave the way to NAMI's future with a "virtual brick" in NAMI's 25th Anniversary Celebratory Wall. Like a bricks-and-mortar wall, NAMI's foundational strength derives from the individuals who support us. The Celebratory Wall offers a visible way to construct NAMI's future, one block at a time. Come build with us!

25th Annual NAMI Convention

Washington, D.C., Sep. 8-11, 2004
Contact: Ann Nagle
(Ann@nami.org)

Three program-packed days of workshops, panels, and exhibits follow a day of Capitol Hill advocacy and culminate in a banquet celebration at the Washington Hilton and Towers. Online and onsite registrations are available.

"Time for Hope" A Celebrity Entertainment Benefit

Ryman Auditorium, Nashville, Tennessee, Nov. 19, 2004
Contact: Katrina Gay
(Kgay@nami.org)

Country music sensation Clint Black will offer this benefit concert to promote "a time for hope" in celebration of NAMI's 25th anniversary. National and Tennessee leaders will gather for this festive and celebratory concert. Come join the fun!

25th Anniversary Online Auction

Online worldwide
www.namiauction.org,
Nov. 5-14, 2004
Contact: Katrina Gay
(Kgay@nami.org)

A first for NAMI, this world-wide online auction will feature a breathtaking array of items for bid: vacation destinations, artisans' work, sporting equipment, NAMI memorabilia, entertainment packages, themed baskets – and more. Donations large and small are being accepted right up to the opening bids. Going...going...don't let it be gone without you!

NAMI Walks, D.C.!

Freedom Plaza, Washington, D.C.,
Nov. 6, 2004
Contact: Joleen Bagwell
(Jbagwell@nami.org)

After two years of overwhelming success in the field, NAMI brings its signature Walk to the streets of the nation's capital to raise funds and awareness.

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Thousands of NAMI friends, new and old, will walk 5K from Freedom Plaza to the foot of Capitol Hill. Walkers, donors, sponsors and spectators alike will find exciting ways to join the fun!

25th Anniversary Edition, Advocate

Winter 2004

Contact: Jennifer Nevins
(Jennifer@nami.org)

NAMI's quarterly news magazine will pay tribute to 25 years of education, support, advocacy

and research in a special anniversary edition. With features on the founders and members who have made these years all that they have been, NAMI will put the spotlight on a quarter century of "changing minds."

Science & Research Gala

Washington, D.C., Feb. 2005

Contact: Katrina Gay
(Kgay@nami.org)

NAMI honors the men and women who have helped define the modern understanding of mental illness—and who each

day move us closer to improved treatments and eventual cures. Academic, policy, and research leaders will be joined by friends and fans for a gala evening event. Join us in paying tribute to those who have and will shape the course of research on serious mental illnesses!

"Unmasking the Mystery of Mental Illness"

New Orleans, LA, March 5, 2005

Contact: Katrina Gay
(Kgay@nami.org)

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have been involved in corporate turnarounds, acquisitions and divestitures, and was instrumental in the formation of four new ventures.

Along the journey in 1968, I married my wife, Valerie, and we had a beautiful daughter, Christine, in 1979. In 1987, Christine was diagnosed with generalized anxiety, bipolar disorder and a cognitive deficit. When her problems became apparent, I acted quickly to ensure early intervention.

NAMI quickly became a significant part of my life, as well as my daughter's. NAMI played a very important role in helping us find appropriate treatment in today's horrific mental health services environment. I am proud to say that my daughter, despite her many difficulties, has modeled professionally, become an established concert photographer, and recently graduated with honors from New York University. She is planning a career in producing films. I am so proud of her!

In turn, I have become very active in NAMI's cause at the national, state and local levels. I know not everyone who

struggles with mental illness is as fortunate as I have been. I want to help others along the path to recovery. I have served as an In Our Own Voice Presenter and National Trainer and have contributed to the organization's efforts in a variety of ways. NAMI has provided me with the means for expressing appreciation for all the good things that have happened to me and my daughter by empowering me with opportunities for advocacy and practical ways of giving back every day by helping others. Now retired, I devote a significant amount of my time to the realization of NAMI's goals.

What is the significance of all this? Why is my story worth telling? The answer is that mine and my daughter's experiences clearly demonstrate what can happen to children and adolescents with serious brain diseases when the best treatments available are provided in a timely fashion, along with respect, education and family involvement. We are living proof

that recovery is possible. And, my story is worth telling because more and more people MUST learn about mental illness and that effective treatment for serious brain disorders IS available to the youth of our country, and that with early intervention it can make a significant difference in their lives.



About the Author:
Robin Cunningham has lived with schizophrenia for over 48 years. Despite the agonies of this chronic illness, he has achieved significant success. He retired after a highly

successful twenty-five year career in business. He attributes his success in life to a psychiatrist that was 30 years ahead of his time, appropriate medication properly integrated with effective therapy, his mother's vigorous advocacy on his behalf and a fundamental set of coping skills that he learned early in his illness. He now devotes his time to writing, public speaking and to advocacy with NAMI for others with mental illness.

NAMI Walks

A rainbow spread across the office park, but the rain dared not fall. Six hundred feet walked five kilometers, but spirits were high. Some of us drove four hours just to walk for one – but we wouldn't have had it any other way.

Like thousands of others across the country, I joined a NAMIwalk in May to demonstrate my support for NAMI and to “raise funds and friends”. This was a new and major undertaking for the dedicated NAMI members who hosted the event. With support



from the National office and typical NAMI gumption, the local volunteers took it on and now have great things to show for their efforts. More than 300 walkers raised more than \$55,000 for NAMI efforts in the Richmond area; the local paper ran a wonderful feature story on the event; and local businesses came out as event sponsors and donated food and drinks. I was proud to raise nearly \$1000 personally for NAMI Central Virginia – for NAMI members I didn't even know but whose cause captured the imagination of my family and friends. Months later, I am still getting donations from friends who are impressed by the need for NAMI in every community and are happy to support NAMI Central Virginia



— even from across the country!

But what was most delightful and most rewarding about the Walk was the energy of the people – consumers, elderly parents, young children – who were proud participants in the days' events. For some, the 3.5 mile walk was a

physical challenge, but their determination to be a part of the fun, awareness-raising happening overcame even the most tired of knees and ankles. That rainbow I mentioned wasn't from the held-off rain; it was created by the brightly colored team T-shirts that people sported as we walked together. But those fabulous colors paled in comparison to the luminous smiles and profound satisfaction generated by being part of a great day for a great cause.

—Lynn Borton

The Youth Voice within NAMI

The NAMI Child and Adolescent Action Center is pleased to announce the creation of a Teen Advisory Group. NAMI is delighted to have the youth voice included as part of our work.

The teens participating on the advisory group will provide a much-needed youth voice to NAMI's advocacy work. They will develop messages and outreach materials to help combat the troubling stigma that

youth and adults who live with mental illnesses experience every day. They will work in their communities to educate those around them about mental illnesses and to put a face on the illnesses.

They will also assist in the development of an online community for young people, their families and friends to raise awareness and share information and support. They will undertake

projects that promise to lead the public to a better understanding of mental illnesses and the hope that intervention and effective treatment offers.

NAMI thanks these youth leaders and values their participation in our advocacy, education and support work. For more information about the teen advisory group, please contact Darcy Gruttadaro at Darcy@nami.org.

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An intimate evening to honor three national leaders Louisiana leaders who have shaped the way the nation views mental

illness. Senator John Breaux, U.S. Representative Billy Tauzin, and NAMI's own Dr. Edward Foulks will be feted by academic,

artistic, social and political thought leaders. No one knows how to throw a party better than New Orleans!