

Reflection: Candlelight Vigil, Sycamore UCC, October 13, 2011

I'd like to remember 3 NAMI friends who have passed away this year: Kandy Owens, who was a long time member of the Connections Recovery Support Group in Fremont, Gary Shoup, past NAMI Board member and valued speaker and instructor in several NAMI programs, and David Van Der Laar, son of John Van Der Laar and brother to our Board treasurer Mary Jo Wagner and to me. I would like to take a moment of silence to honor their lives and their journeys with our affiliate.

I would like to reflect further on the life and death of my brother David Van Der Laar. David died at the age of 48 on July 1 at Buckeye Group Home in Clyde as a result of lung cancer. It was David's struggle with schizophrenia that inspired this NAMI affiliate's formation in 1988. His father John joined with other families who cared deeply and advocated passionately for their loved ones and others who lived with mental illness in our communities.

Over the years NAMI has taught us again and again to see the person rather than the illness. We learned this at a deeper level, when David was diagnosed with Stage 4 cancer this spring. David, like anyone faced with this news, had trouble believing it was true. But as he came to accept it, he began to "live like he was dying," reaching out toward people in new ways. As we sat together when he grew weaker, he was present to us with a new sort of urgency and a clarity we had not seen in a long time. And we in turn became more present to him out of that same urgency.

Spending many hours at the Buckeye Home in his last months, we got to know residents and caregivers better. Sharing stories, consolation, and hugs, we found that labels faded away and we were all one. In those moments there was no diagnosis other than human and no remedy other than love.

David's favorite caregiver was a compassionate woman named Weezie. Weezie shared with us that she and David would sit out on the patio at night for a cigarette. They would search the night sky together. Weezie would pick her favorite star and then she would ask David to choose his favorite. How simply human is that? Weezie and David, caregiver and care receiver, person with and person without schizophrenia, both smokers who loved to sit outside at night and look at the stars. I was taken aback by Weezie's story. I had never sat outside gazing at the stars with my brother. I had never thought to ask him such a simple human question: which star is your favorite? I had not stopped to think he might care about such a thing. Weezie had shown me the most elementary principle of caring: we are all one, we share so many needs, wants, likes, dislikes, hopes, dreams. We need not create barriers out of labels. We need only to find ways to be present to one another, to simply be with each other.

Being present to one another is the first step toward breaking down stigma or prejudice. What is prejudice but pre-judging and what is pre-judging, but jumping to conclusions without getting to know a person. I like to call this problem prejudice rather than stigma, because it puts the responsibility where it belongs—with the one doing the judging. There is no mark to erase, only judgments to suspend.

No matter how much of an advocate we think we are, we can use to practice this presence with one another. This is the core of life and of love. Sometimes it's not easy for either party. Sometimes it takes great courage for all involved. Sometimes we have to wait for an opening. Sometimes we have to create the opening. But in the end we can celebrate together. Let me end on that note then: Let us: Celebrate Life! Celebrate Love! Celebrate Courage!

--Josie Setzler